Lost Cause by BigBadLittleRed

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst, Child Abuse, Dream Realms, Electrocution, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, Fall of '84, Homophobic Language, Hurt/Comfort, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Medical Trauma, Past Abuse, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Psychological Trauma, Slow Burn Steve/Jonathan, Telekinesis, This is going to get pretty dark, Violence, Writing My Own Season 2, psychic powers
Language: English
Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers
Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper
Status: Completed
Published: 2016-11-10
Updated: 2017-04-16
Packaged: 2022-04-02 00:29:21
Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply
Chapters: 10
Words: 120,593
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

Nothing really ever settled after the events that had happened the year before, not really. Hawkins was monster free but at the same time, everyone that was involved in the disappearance of Will Byers was permanently scarred. From alternate dimensions to little girls with powers, they all bear losses of friends, innocence, and feelings of safety. They should have known that it wasn't over. No, it was just beginning.

The Byers brothers are haunted by voices and dreams of a familiar face, while gruesome deaths begin to occur, and suspicious strangers are snooping about. Hawkins is sucked into a whirlwind of hell, and the kids are caught smack in the middle of it once again.

1. Desperate To Forget

Author's Note:

> (The title of this fic is from the song Lost Cause by Imagine Dragons)
>
> (Okay, so this is a trial chapter of sorts! I could continue on making them this long, or if you guys want I can shorten them. I wanted to make them as if they were actual episodes of Stranger Things, but I want to know if you guys are cool with that or not! Leave me feedback in the comments, I read every single one of them and I'm always appreciative of every single one of them! Please enjoy!)

November 14th, 1984

The night is creepy and unsettling in many ways it hadn't been before The Incident. With every rustle, every noise, the hairs on the back of his neck tends to stand up. But now, brain mottled with stolen whiskey from his mother's liquor cabinet, it wasn't so bad. Jonathan stares down at the bottle with distaste; he couldn't quite believe that he was committing such an act. He'd promised to himself from a young age that he would never ever drink, and yet here he was.

It probably wasn't a good idea to be sitting drunk on the edge of a cliff, but he liked looking out on the scenery and didn't want to stand and sway so far he fell in. There were some people that said a person could survive the drop, but he didn't really believe it. Nobody would ever imitate it unless they wanted to die a horrible death, or at least sustain serious injury. He tips the half empty bottle of Jack back and swallows two mouthfuls of the awful burning liquid that tasted like gasoline. He never understood people who enjoyed drinking, but he could understand finding relief in the feeling of being drunk.

It wasn't just for fun, he felt like he had no other option. It was as if he was losing his sanity with every normal action committed. Almost like everyone was pretending nothing had happened. Life went on as if they hadn't seen what they had seen, as if the Upside Down, the government, it was all some sort of bad dream. It was a bad dream that his brother was declared dead, a bad dream that a monster from a parallel universe had almost eaten him.

Of course Jonathan was alive, and Will was home right now, asleep in bed most likely. But that didn't matter to him very much anymore, considering the strain on everything at home. Lonnie kept stopping by, talking about how much he wanted to spend time with the boys. Jonathan had told him to piss off but Will seemed like he was thinking about it too hard, he hadn't let go of the idea of having a good father. Jonathan had practically raised Will himself, if anyone was Will's father it was him.

Jonathan felt like his stable and simple life had been shattered into pieces in front of him when Will left, and after fighting the monster and getting his brother back nothing was really fixed. It was like they had taken the shattered glass and taped it back together. The cracks were still there, and pieces weren't exactly stuck together so they kept falling away and breaking even more. It was only a matter of time before he shattered again. Maybe this time it would be for good.

His life was different, and yet the same. His mother still worked, but she called in every evening to make sure where her boys were. Everyone at school ignored him, except for Nancy and Steve that is. They seemed to be trying to build a sort of new comradery with him that he wasn't quite sure how to handle. The weird thing about it was that it was less of Nancy trying to pin Jonathan to Steve, it was more like Steve was trying to become Jonathan's best friend. It

was not only weird, but a little unsettling in its own way.

He used to hate Steve, but it was hard to completely loathe a person that saved your life. He didn't seem like an awful guy, and he was trying his best to win Jonathan over for some reason. If Jonathan didn't show him the correct amount of attention or respond to him, he'd apologize for the fight, for the things he said. It was as if he assumed Jonathan was still mad about it, which wasn't true.

He found it difficult to settle into a life that seemed nothing more than a lie; everyone was trying to move on. It wasn't like Jonathan wanted to talk about it, but he felt like every memory was a fever dream that nobody knew about with the way they acted. It made him feel alone and isolated, more than ever. Not even Will would talk to him about it, the boy who still screamed himself awake sometimes and stared at nothing for long periods of time.

That was another part of his life that seemed like a lie, his once strong relationship with Will. They used to talk about everything, late at night when their mother wasn't home. About Will's feelings, about their school bully, about anything really. But now, he could barely get a word from the boy, it was like he was a different person.

There was also the nightmares, the god awful nightmares that wouldn't leave Jonathan alone. He takes another swallow of the whiskey at the thought, an attempt to drown them out with alcohol. He sets the bottle between his legs and stares down at the amber colored liquid through the opening. He had grown up weak and helpless, but he'd gotten stronger, he'd built up walls to protect himself from it all.

Yet here he was, drinking late into the night at the quarry cliff, because he couldn't sleep through his nightmares. The dreams where Will turned into something resembling the monster, or where his brother was crying out for him and Jonathan couldn't find him. There were others of course, but one unsettled him the most.

It all starts the same, standing in his pajamas with only pitch black around him. It's not dark; he can see his own arms and his clothes clearly. It's almost as if nothing exists around him, and the ground below him is wet and hard, what he hopes is water seeping into his socks. Then a faint whispering starts, a few voices turning into millions speaking softly at once until it's deafening and unbearable. He can't understand a word they're saying, but they're everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Then the girl, the girl that dropped into their lives suddenly and left it just as quick appears before him. She's haggard and panicked, taking his hand and leading him into a run. Something is suddenly behind them, there's nothing but the voices in his ears, no footsteps but there is a feeling of something at his back. They run aimlessly until they reach a fort made out of pillows, covered in dark colored roots and cobwebs.

Eleven ducks into it and beckons him inside frantically, but he's suddenly frozen in place. It always ends the same, the whispers stop without warning, hot breath against his neck. Something touches his back, similar to a hand but not exactly. The pillow fort disappears and he's yanked backwards with such force that he wakes up, sweating and in tears.

He hates that one, and he's not even sure why his mind conjured it up, but it makes him crazy. It haunts him for some reason, more than the others do. It seems too real, too vivid, he hates

it. That is why he's here, why he's taking another drink of whiskey and wiping away tears of frustration. Why weren't Nancy and Steve struggling with this? Why did he seem like the only one with problems going back to their old lives?

Part of him believes he's losing his mind, and it's slowly consuming the rest of him that is so sure that he's just fine. Jonathan stands up and walks back to his car, body heavy with alcohol. He clumsily opens the driver's side door, slumping down into the seat and taking the bottle cap and trying to screw it back on. It takes a few tries with his uncooperative hands, but eventually it goes on and he tosses the bottle into the back.

Jonathan can still feel the force at his back, a phantom memory, and he automatically searches the tree line for any sign of something. He closes his car door quickly and locks the doors, sighing shakily as he reclines his seat and turns over onto his side. He stares into the dark woods until he feels nervous and uneasy once more, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to forget about it.

He falls asleep after a few minutes, drifting into an uneasy drunken slumber. He can only hope that he doesn't have nightmares tonight.

-

"Look what I found!" Mike exclaims as he races up to his friends after school, holding up a glittery red barrette with a ladybug on it. He's smiling brightly, obviously excited about his find.

He had been doing this since Eleven had gone missing, collecting things he thought would be nice for Eleven to return to.

There was a box stuffed in the pillow fort in his basement, slowly filling with things like hair clips and bracelets, even some of Nancy's old clothes. They had all done it one time or another, as a show of solidarity to Mike. But it was weird talking about her to Will, considering he'd never met her.

Will must have felt bad about Eleven, he was a little awkward with talking about her. He didn't know her, but he knew the stories and how much she had done for all of them. He also knew how she had helped them in looking for him, even though she didn't know him. So every once in a while he'd add a picture or two to the pillow fort wall. He drew pictures of all of them as their D&D characters, including Eleven who'd they had all unanimously decided was a sorceress.

"Nice, man." Lucas pats his friend on the back; they all begin to head towards their bikes. Nobody would ever crush Mike's hope of Eleven returning, they all secretly hoped that she was okay but at the same time they knew that it was most likely just that. Empty hope.

"So are we meeting up this Friday or what?" Lucas questions as he shoves his hands into the pockets of his jean jacket, swiveling his head back and forth to look at the others on either side of him.

"Shit! I forgot!" Dustin leaps out in front of them, causing Mike, Lucas, and Will to stagger to a halt to prevent a crash. "I totally snagged a horror movie from my dad's VHS cabinet; we can watch it in your basement, Mike!" He waves his hands about, grinning with that toothless smile.

“I guess, but I’ll have to ask because my dad’s having one of his work friends over for dinner.” Mike explains with a shrug, Dustin scoffs and Lucas frowns.

“Work friends? Since when does your dad have any friends?” Dustin questions, slightly jokingly. They all knew that Mike’s father was a bit of an odd guy, zoned out on most occasions and was commonly disinterested and unattached to practically everyone. It had gotten a little worse over the years, straining his marriage and the family to their wits ends. They didn’t discuss it, but Mike didn’t like to talk about his family very much because of it.

“I don’t know, but Nancy’s pissed because she wanted to go out to dinner with Steve.” He says the older boy’s name with disdain, rolling his eyes as they begin walking again. It wasn’t that he especially disliked the guy, he was a little goofy and stupid, but he wasn’t really that bad of a guy. It was the idea of him locking lips with his sister that made him uncomfortable.

“Maybe we could go to Will’s house.” Lucas suggests as they all reach the bike rack and begin to pull their individual bicycles off. The other three glance over at Will, who’s frowning down at his bike thoughtfully. When he doesn’t answer, Mike looks over at Dustin, who shakes his head.

“Will?” Mike bumps the other boy with his elbow gently. Will jumps a little, blinking at Mike as he startles in the slightest.

“What?” He asks innocently, swinging a leg over his seat and balancing himself. Ever since the Upside Down, Will had been a little different. He had a tendency to tune out everything around him, isolate himself a little more than he used to. He had always

been talkative and excited, now he was a lot like his brother, subdued and dazed.

"If we can't watch the movie at my house, can we go to yours?" Mike reiterates, Will glances away in thought and licks his lips.

"Sure, my mom won't mind but I'll ask Jonathan just in case." He shrugs; Lucas leads them off down the grass and onto the road. The chill of winter is already in the air, biting their cheeks and their knuckles against the handlebars.

The thought of winter sends a reminder of Eleven through Mike's mind; it had been about a year since The Incident. They couldn't find a trace of her; it was almost as if she'd never existed. The only reminder he had left of her was the pillow fort, and he only kept her memory alive with the pretty little things he picks up and puts into a box for her return.

In the beginning, there had been talk of finding her, but it eventually just faded away. There was no evidence, nowhere to start, nowhere to go. She just vanished from their lives like some sort of vivid hallucination.

"Mike, does Jonathan ever come over to your house?" Will asks over the whip of the wind, his hair blowing back with the force of their speed. Mike wonders if that's what he was thinking about before, about his brother. He seemed worried about his brother back before The Incident, always concerned about him for some reason or another. Then again, Jonathan seemed to worry about Will a lot as well.

He never understood that, Nancy never worried much about him, so Mike never worried much about Nancy. He loved her, they just weren't very close. At least not until after The Incident of course, now they were closer than ever.

"When he comes to pick you up." Mike replies with a frown, Will seems troubled by that response. "Why? Something up?" He questions, Will shakes his head.

"I don't know, he's just acting weird."

"Your brother? Acting weird? That's not news, Byers." Dustin smirks, Will rolls his eyes but smiles in the slightest. They all liked Jonathan, he was a nice guy, and they all ribbed each other from time to time. Ever since Will had gotten home, Jonathan had taken up driving the other boys home when he came to get Will. It didn't matter that he was weird because they were weird; it was like a little club that gave easy companionship to each other.

Weirdos had to stick together, because otherwise, they were just lonely.

"He's not the same," Will tells them, a little more seriously as they weave through the streets and slow in the slightest to turn.

"Is anybody?" Lucas asks rhetorically, always the one to say something meaningful. They all ponder this a moment, stunned into silence. It was true, while things weren't outright different,

nothing was the same. Things like the Demogorgon changed people, not just them but everyone else involved as well.

Nancy had lost her best friend, Will had been taken into a hellish dimension, Mike had met an amazing girl and lost her within a week. He thinks back to the Winter Ball, when he sat in the pillow fort refusing to attend with his friends, protesting the idea of breaking the promise in that way. He wouldn't go without her, he just wouldn't. Halfway through the night, the others had joined him, not wanting him to be alone.

Everyone had been different; it just wasn't expected of the older ones to be altered. It was strange to think that adults could be hurt in the ways they could, it made them seem more vulnerable than the boys saw them as. Jonathan was always a sort of shield for them, he'd taken them Trick-Or-Treating and drove them to the movies on a regular basis. No twelve year old would dare mess with them with a sixteen year old at their back.

Mike's older sister, Will's big brother, his mother, they weren't supposed to be affected by childish things. Then again, this was no childish event. It was deadly, scary; traumatizing was a word Nancy had used.

Mike lifts himself off of his seat as they cross over a hard curb, the bike jerking with the impact. He keeps a firm grip on the handlebars, pressing back against his breaks so he doesn't run into the garage door. They all ride up behind him, slipping off of their bikes.

"He's shutting down again, like after dad left." Will says, and they all understand immediately what their friend means. After

Lonnie had left, the Byers had been in shambles. Will had talked to Mike the first few days instead of Jonathan, who refused to speak to even his family.

"How's your mom?" Dustin asks as they head around into the back yard, dropping their bikes in the grass just before they reach the door. Mike opens the door and they all trail inside, through the kitchen and towards the stairs.

"I think she's dating Hopper," Mike pauses in his steps, looking back at his friend incredulously. Will gives him a sort of 'I know' look and moves past him with a roll of his eyes. "He's nicer than my dad,"

"That's good." Lucas says as they descend the stairs, a sound causing them all to fall quiet and still.

Radio static.

"Eleven!" Mike calls, then shoving past his friends to race down the steps and over to the pillow fort. He pulls back the blanket, eyes wide, face falling in the slightest when he finds it empty besides the sleeping bag, box, and the radio.

He picks up the radio, which is crackling and hissing with white noise. He checks it over, noting how it's turned on and not just busted. Mike raises the radio to his face and clicks the button.

“Hello? Is anyone there? Over.”

More static, he looks back at his friends with a sigh; he was tired of all of these letdowns. The others give him slightly sympathetic looks, and Dustin raises his hand to gesture it.

“It’s probably busted,” He offers with a slight frown. His mouth opens once more, the next word on his tongue right as a voice crackles through. Everyone’s eyes widen, and Mike looks back to the radio in shock. A girl, definitely!

“Eleven, is that you? Over.” Mike demands with excitement, springing to his feet. He runs a hand through his hair, squeezing his eyes shut and listening to the loop of static.

More words, unintelligible, but then!

“Mike!”

Mike grins, laughing brightly. Lucas and Dustin begin to smile as well, this was real, this wasn’t just some false alarm! Will’s face is oddly pale, expression slightly haunted. Mike doesn’t have much time to dwell on that, he needs to talk to Eleven.

“El, it’s Mike! Can you hear me?” He asks, practically bouncing with excitement.

“-coming, Mike!” Eleven’s voice crackles through once more, Mike shakes his head and looks to his friends in confusion.

“Humming?” Dustin asks with a frown, Lucas shakes his head. They don’t notice the way Will takes a step back and crosses his arms, obviously uncomfortable.

“Not humming, something’s coming!” Lucas waves his arms about, pointing to the radio. “Ask her where she is!” Mike seems to remember the situation then, pressing the button and bringing the radio up again.

“El, where are you?” He questions frantically, afraid of losing the already weak signal.

“Not safe!” More garbled noise, then a hissing noise of a different type. Less like static, more like a snake’s rattle. Mike is in shock when Will lunges forward and snatches the radio from him, fingers scrambling for the power button.

“What the hell, Will?!” They collide in a fight for the radio, spinning in a circle as they shove at each other and pull on the radio. “That’s Eleven!” He snarls, Dustin grabs Will from behind and tears him away from Mike, Lucas holds the younger Wheeler back from charging forward.

There’s more static, Eleven’s still talking but it’s barely intelligible from the intermediate lapses of static, Dustin forces the radio from Will’s hand and moves away from all of them. He turns his back to Will when he tries to reach for the radio again, Lucas and

Mike move forward and each grab one of the boy's arms.

"Eleven, it's Dustin!" He says into the microphone. "We need to know where you are!" He pleads, gripping the radio tight in his hand.

No response comes, only static; Dustin grunts in frustration and tosses the walkie-talkie onto the couch. Lucas and Mike release Will, Mike then pushes his friend in anger.

"What's wrong with you!?" He snaps, Will shakes his head and turns away from them. He storms over to the stairs and jerks away when Lucas tries to reach for him.

"Will, get back here, man!" Lucas demands, they all follow him up the stairs and have to pick up speed when he starts running out into the backyard. The boy is lifting his bike upright in jerky movements, switching his hands to wipe at his face where tears now run down them.

"Will, stop." Mike places a hand on the bike, holding it from moving. "Friends don't lie, remember?" He ducks his head a little in an attempt to meet his best friend's eyes, and Will raises his gaze to meet with him.

"I've been seeing her, in my dreams." Will says, voice quivering. He presses his left thumb and index finger to his eyes and sniffs softly, shoulders hunched. "She's been talking to me, asking me to tell you things… I didn't think they were real, they couldn't be." He shakes his head furiously and then hiccups.

“What’d she say, Will?” Mike asks, stepping closer and placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “What did Eleven say?” He questions, more insistently.

“There’s a monster, not the Demogorgon. She said it’s here somewhere, with us. It’s already here and it’s going to kill us.” Will whispers fearfully, eyes filled with tears.

Mike allows this news to sink in, a tense silence befalling the boys. They all startle when someone clears their throat, spinning about to face Steve. He looks unsettled, awkward, but still concerned in the slightest.

“Sorry, I was just supposed to go inside and get Nancy’s jacket.” He explains, pointing to the back door weakly. “Is everything okay?” He looks to Will for that answer, the boy still looked a little pale in the face with the skin around his eyes an irritated pink.

“Yeah, everything’s okay.” Will assures, all of the previous fear and uncertainty wiping off of his face within a blink of an eye. It makes Mike wonder how good Will was about lying, and how often he did it to his friends, his family. Before the Upside Down, he couldn’t lie to anyone, but yet just then it looked as if it didn’t require any effort whatsoever.

“You sound like Jonathan.” Steve grumbles, shaking his head and beginning to step around them. His hand pauses on the screen door handle, and he glances back at the younger Byers. “Is he doing okay?” He questions gently, Will frowns in the slightest.

“Why?” He asks, immediately concerned. “Do you think something’s wrong?” Steve’s eyes widen in the slightest, and he shakes his head.

“I’m sure he’s fine. No need to freak out, little man.” He sighs in exasperation and opens the door, pausing once more. “He works at the movie theatre, right?” The older boy inquires, and when Will nods his head slowly the teen smirks. “Right, thanks.” He walks into the house without another word, the screen door slamming against the frame with a rickety creak.

Everyone slowly looks to Will, who crosses his arms defensively.

“He’s weird.” He says with a shake of his head, the other boys laugh softly and the tension of the situation diffuses immediately.

“Perfect for your brother, then.” Dustin remarks jokingly, Will rolls his eyes and reaches out to shove his friend lightly. “Kidding!” He promises, gripping Will’s jacket sleeve and tugging him close to sling an arm around him. “I want to hear more about those dreams.”

“I dunno,” Will answers uncertainly, glancing between his friends.

“If the monster’s already here, we could at least try to look

for Eleven, Will." Mike explains, Will looks to Lucas, who nods his head in agreement.

"Okay, fine. But we can't tell anyone yet." He says firmly.

"Why not?" Lucas demands in outrage, Will shoots him a look.

"Everything's just getting back to normal; I don't want to worry anyone yet." He tells them simply, Mike nods.

"He's right; we keep this between us for now." Mike holds out his hand and the others hesitantly place their own on top of each other's in a pile. They leap apart when the back door slams open again, but Steve barely stops to look at them.

"Bye guys, stay out of trouble!" He calls as he races around the house, the boys look to each other with a sort of amused confidence.

"He has no idea." Dustin grins.

-

The movie theatre on Pine Street was possibly one of Jonathan's favorite places in the world, easy. It didn't take much to satisfy the eldest Byers, and pretty much anywhere dimly lit and isolated accomplished that task. When he was fifteen he asked for a

job there, and he'd been working ever since.

The dark and quiet never bothered him before, but since The Incident, it seemed as if every little thing was unsettling. The light near the front door is flickering idly, and before now it wouldn't have bothered him, but now it was more concerning than anything else. He glances over his shoulder out of nervous habit; the once comforting feeling of a wall behind him was now ruined with the idea of something tearing through it.

But he still needed to work, and the movie theatre was his best bet. It wasn't a bad gig, he wasn't doing much but helping his mother out with a little extra cash, and the work itself wasn't demanding very much. Sweep up trash, hand out popcorn, and sell tickets. Most of the kids from school came by; they never spoke outside of what was necessary though.

At least until now, he supposes.

"What are you doing here?" Jonathan asks with a sigh as he slips off his headphones, having been sitting bored behind the counter for the past few hours. Steve simply flashes his cheesiest grin and laughs, approaching the counter and leaning his upper half against it.

"I can't just visit my friend at his job?" The boy asks teasingly, Jonathan shakes his head slowly.

"Not with that face, what do you want?" He asks, straight and to the point. He had slowly been developing a headache for the

last hour and it was sure to get worse with Steve around. Jonathan wasn't sure why Steve was trying to hang around him, at first it was just at school, now at work too? He just didn't get Steve Harrington; the once popular carefree jerk was now a carefree unpopular annoyance.

Jonathan had spent the night after fighting the Demogorgon at Steve Harrington's house with Steve himself and Nancy Wheeler. Steve had let them explain the situation, and he'd refused to let them go home alone. It was oddly sweet, being worried about, he assumed Steve was just kissing Jonathan's ass to get back with Nancy.

But Nancy wasn't here, and yet Steve was.

He'd never had friends before, but he was beginning to believe that was what Steve really wanted. He just kept coming around, kept gravitating to Jonathan. He was like tree sap, sticky and annoying, but sap also left a sweet smell even after it was gone.

Damn it.

"Nothing, I just wanted to see your pretty face." Steve tells him with a smirk; Jonathan rolls his eyes but can't help the blush that builds in his cheeks.

"I'm working," Jonathan reminds him unnecessarily, Steve makes a show of looking around at the empty lobby. Jonathan falls back into his chair with a sigh and drops his head onto the countertop.

“You’re right, Jonny-Boy, this place is packed.” There’s a noise as Steve slides onto the counter, and then a hand is tussling his hair. “This place is creepy, how do you stand it?” He mutters, Jonathan grins into his arms.

“It’s funny; I think a lot of people have asked the same about me.” He says jokingly, falling quiet when Steve doesn’t seem to appreciate his slightly dark humor. He holds his breath for a moment, knowing what’s coming.

“I’m sorry.” Jonathan wants to beat Steve up again, just to make them even. He wouldn’t stop saying it, whenever a lull occurred in the conversation (which was often considering Jonathan’s tendency for quiet), or whenever Steve saw fit. Pity, Steve must pity him.

“I don’t need your pity.” He says snottily, sitting up. The light near the door is still flickering, and Steve seems to have caught it as well. They both stare at it in tense silence, reminded of the horrors they witnessed the year before.

How could something as simple as a light short circuiting cause such awful thoughts and a primal sense of fear? Jonathan stands up, a bit in a huff, and picks up the chair before storming over to the door. He drops the chair, stands up on it, and reaches for the bulb.

“Careful, man.” Steve says, apparently having followed him. His hand touches the small of Jonathan’s back to steady him, Jonathan stretches his arms up and his fingers brush the edge of the

light box, he gets frustrated when he can't reach so he smacks a hand against it. The light begins to flicker more intermediately, so he hits it again.

The light box swings down with the movement and crashes to the floor with a thud, narrowly missing Jonathan's head in the process.

"Okay, hold up."

Jonathan startles when arms wrap around his waist and haul him down off the chair with ease, he steps back from Steve with cheeks aflame. Steve pays him no mind, grabbing the light cover and stepping up onto the chair with far more grace than Jonathan had. He reaches the light bulb and tweaks it in the slightest, before replacing the cover.

Jonathan watches in silence, his hand coming up out of nervous habit to brush over his lips and against his teeth. He used to bite his nails; it was a nasty habit that he only broke by clipping his nails extremely short. However, he then picked up the habit of biting and sucking on his fingers in place of it, which was odder to people but at least it was less harmful to himself.

"There, all fixed." Steve leaps down and grins proudly at Jonathan, like he expects some sort of praise. For a moment, Jonathan considers the idea of Steve's often absent parents and the effect it had on his insecurities. But he soon wipes it all away when he remembers who Steve Harrington is, a dick that never cared about him before so why should Jonathan care about him?

“Thanks,” He mumbles, ducking his head and grabbing the back of the chair to drag it back behind the counter. He doesn’t dare glance back at Steve; the idea of seeing his stupid charming puppy dog eyes is enough to deter him.

“I saw your brother and his dork squad today,” Steve approaches the counter more warily this time, as if approaching a skittish animal. Jonathan supposed he was like a wild animal in some respects, suspicious and wary of pretty much everything now including flickering lights and his own house’s hallway.

“Where?” Jonathan questions, figuring it’s a safe enough inquiry.

“Outside Nancy’s place, I was going inside to get her jacket.” The other boy explains, frowning a little. “They were having a pretty heated discussion when I walked around the house.” He says quietly, Jonathan turns to busy himself. He picks up a rag and begins wiping the back counter needlessly.

“They do that.” He offers simply, Steve is quiet for a moment.

“I think your brother was crying.” Jonathan spins around so fast he hits his leg on the chair and grunts as he staggers into the counter, paying no mind to the dull pain.

“Crying?” He demands, Steve gives him a sort of helpless look.

“It seemed like it, I dunno. Are things okay at home and stuff?” He sounds very rehearsed in his words, so that was the reason he was here. Had Nancy put him up to this?

“Peachy.” He snaps, running a hand through his hair. His headache was sharpening with the irritation of everything, why would Will be crying? He thought everyone was okay, then again nobody ever told Jonathan anything in the first place.

It had barely been a year; of course his kid brother wasn’t all right. How could he have been so stupid as to assume such a thing? Maybe it was less of everyone acting normal and more of Jonathan accusing everyone of not acting the way he believed they should. And not for the first time either.

Please, friends protect friends.

Jonathan swivels his head about, looking around for the source of the voice. It sounded like a girl, not just any girl, though. He leans forward against the counter, looks left and right through the lobby.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asks, following Jonathan’s seeking gaze through the lobby behind him.

“Nothing, I just… I thought I heard someone.” He shakes his head, tugging on his bangs a little fretfully as the pain builds behind his eyes in the slightest. He sits down in his chair once more; Steve begins to talk about something unimportant. Jonathan is grateful for the change of topic, listening to his friend chatter on

about a new movie that's coming out soon.

Protect them!

Jonathan freezes in his seat, deathly still as he hopes to pinpoint the origin of the voice that seemed to be echoing through his skull.

It's coming, bad, very bad.

"Jesus, Jonny." Steve startles him; he looks up at his friend in alarm. Steve looks worried, nervous. Could he hear the voice too? "Your nose is bleeding."

"W-What?" He brings up a hand and swipes it over his lip, noting the red smear that stains his skin. He immediately feels another stream run down his lip, and blood drips down onto his shirt. "J-Jeez.," He gets to his feet and brings a hand up to prevent more blood from getting on things.

Steve comes around and steps behind the counter, taking him by the arm and leading him out. Jonathan's a little too stunned by the blood to dwell on the hand around his wrist.

The inside of the movie theatre bathroom is dirty despite frequent cleanings from Jonathan himself; tiles scuffed and stains of God knows what on the walls. He watches as Steve moves across to the sinks, tugging him along. The taller boy pulls Jonathan's hand from his face and practically maneuvers him like a lifeless doll, which was partially Jonathan's fault is considering he wasn't protesting in the slightest.

A paper towel replaces his hand, pressed gently against his lip and nose. When Jonathan reaches up to take control of the tissue, Steve clicks his tongue at him and grabs his wrist to rinse off his hand. *Like a child*, Jonathan's tired brain supplies him with, *he's treating you like a child.*

"You get nosebleeds a lot?" Steve asks warily, Jonathan isn't quite sure how to respond. Should he explain the voice, or should he lie? The nosebleed couldn't have been a coincidence, and yet part of him still felt he was just losing his mind. He didn't want to get put away in a hospital for hearing voices, but what if this was something to actually be worried about?

"No, but I've been coughing a lot so that might have done it." He lies without effort, it comes naturally. Lying had been a bad habit of his for years, alongside the whole nail biting thing, and many others he couldn't quite recall at the moment. Not with Steve standing way too close and looking at him with that intense concern on his face.

"You weren't coughing." Steve's eyes narrow as he tries to call Jonathan's bluff.

"I was earlier," Jonathan defends; he swats Steve's hand away then and takes the paper into his own, feeling like a child. "Don't you have to go see your girlfriend?" He mutters a little too bitterly, Steve's gaze only softens even more. The worst thing about being friends with Steve Harrington was that every word that came from Jonathan's mouth that was anything but kind, Steve only responded with kindness or jokes in return. He brushed it all off, and Jonathan wasn't really sure how to push him away so he just stopped trying.

“Is that what this is about? You’re mad because of that?” Steve demands, obviously hurt, Jonathan shakes his head. “Yes you are!” He huffs, crossing his arms. “Are you jealous? I thought we were past this.” And it so isn’t about that, sure he still liked Nancy, but he wouldn’t be so petty as to throw a fit over not having her.

There were other fish in the sea, as the saying went.

“No! Of course not!” His headache swells in intensity from the rise in his voice, so he deflates a little and sighs.

“It’s complicated, but it’s not about Nancy, and it’s not about you.” Jonathan tells him simply, wiping his nose a little more and bringing the stained paper towel away from his face to check for more blood in the dirty mirror. Satisfied that the flow had stopped, he throws the tissue away in an already overflowing trash can.

“Then what’s it about?” When he doesn’t respond, Steve follows him. “Jonathan!”

Jonathan opens the door and almost runs right into his manager, who observes them both with raised eyebrows. Steve has a hand twisted in the fabric of Jonathan’s jacket, having to skitter to a stop to avoid bumping into him.

“You, uh…” His manager, Perry, looks between the both of them with an uncomfortable look on his aging face. “You’re not supposed to leave the counter unattended.” He reminds Jonathan weakly, eyes on Steve.

“Sorry, I-I had a nosebleed.” He jerks a thumb back towards the door, Perry holds up both of his hands.

“I don’t care what you call it, just stay at your post.” He says, voice rising an octave before he turns and moves down the hallway towards his office. Steve and Jonathan just stand there for a minute, stunned. Jonathan watches his boss with a puzzled expression for a bit before Steve yanks him back by his jacket.

“If it’s not about Nancy, then what’s it about?” He asks, and they’re sucked back into their earlier conversation.

“Like I said, it’s complicated.” Jonathan ducks his head and walks back to the counter, jumping up to sit on the counter and reaching back for his Walkman. “Don’t get so worked up about it, what does it matter anyway?”

Steve approaches the counter, turning and sitting down on it with much more ease than Jonathan had taken to do so. Damn his long legs. Jonathan holds his Walkman in his lap, he could put it on and ignore Steve, but that just didn’t seem right.

“My best friend is mad at me, how else am I supposed to react?” Steve asks incredulously, not seeming to notice Jonathan’s pause as he continues. “I mean, it’s not like you tell me anything. You practically look like you want to hide when I come around. You basically know everything about me; I have to pry bits and pieces from you. Complain to me, tell me things, don’t you trust me?” He swats at Jonathan’s should in slight irritation.

Jonathan stares at him for a moment, mouth hanging open in the slightest and eyes owlish as they blink at the tall boy standing before him. Best friend? Out of all the people in the world, Steve thought of Jonathan Byers as his best friend?

Not in a million years would he have assumed that, he can barely believe it now that it's been stated. Even if Steve's popularity had diminished a little after the fall out between him and Tommy, there were sure to be others more suited for Steve's best friend.

"I'm your best friend?" Jonathan asks quietly, and realizes how awfully insecure and pitiful it sounds after it leaves his mouth. Steve smiles then, that goofy little thing that both irked Jonathan and yet somehow made his stomach stir with happiness at the same time.

"I don't see anyone else here that fought a monster with me." He teases; Jonathan can't help but smile a little, ducking his head as a blush heats his cheeks. Steve laughs a little more, delighted as always at Jonathan's bashful nature for some reason. "Jonathan Byers, the boy with the prettiest smile and yet we never see it." Jonathan jerks his shoulder into Steve's roughly, grinning a little at Steve's overdramatic "Hey!"

"Piss off, Harrington." He says, earning a shove of his own that makes him feel a burst of warmth inside his chest. Having friends was nice, it really was. But his mind still returns to the voice in his head, could the nosebleed have been caused by the voice in his head?

Jonathan debates telling Steve about it, who's now taken

his Walkman and opened it to examine the cassette inside. He's right there, and he had just given a whole spiel about truth and friends, but something holds him back, doubt. Why would Steve care? Nancy wasn't involved, that was the reason he showed up last time.

Then again, he'd gone to Jonathan's house to apologize first, without even knowing Nancy would be there. That in itself was confusing on its own, the idea that Steve Harrington believed that Jonathan was worth apologizing to was hard to comprehend, but he'd just admitted to Jonathan that they were best friends so anything was possible, he supposed.

But despite their growing friendship, he couldn't find the courage to admit anything. Nobody else was noticing these weird things, nobody could see how different Will was, and nobody else was hearing voices. Maybe after all of it, Jonathan really was losing his mind. The stress of school, of work, of understanding and accepting the fact that a giant monster from another dimension kidnapped his brother was just too much to handle. Not for the first time in his life, he feels weak and helpless.

And not for the first time, he hates it more than anything.

Steve is talking about mix tapes and records, waving his hands about with his face scrunched up as he details the positives and negatives of vinyl. How did Steve just act as if everything was normal? How did anyone go back to their old lives without thinking twice? Were they all lying, like Will, or did they really just move on?

"Dude?" Jonathan blinks a few times, realizing that he was staring right at Steve for an uncomfortable amount of time.

“Sorry, what?” He looks down at his hands in his lap, fingers twitching nervously together.

“Am I bothering you?” Steve asks, sounding suddenly self-conscious of his overeager demeanor. Jonathan wondered if people called him annoying and obnoxious often.

“It’s good to see you.” He answers honestly, feeling actually good about the warmth in the pit of his stomach at the sight of the pleased smile on his friend’s face. His best friend.

-

“So hypothetically, in this book, if there was an alternate shadow dimension…” Dustin leads carefully as he leans against the counter with the phone held to his ear. He’d been talking to Mr. Clarke for the past twenty minutes, discussing a ‘book plot’ that held the same plot as their specific problems.

Mr. Clarke was a smart man, he’d eventually catch on to their antics, but for now they were safe. He couldn’t prove anything other than the fact that Dustin was searching for factual information to make a novel.

The boys listen intently, trying to pick up pieces of the conversation and only catching fractions of Dustin’s non-descriptive responses to Mr. Clarke’s explanation.

“So let’s say someone gets sent to another dimension and someone in this dimension contacts them, through telepathy of course. Could that person contact them in return, or would it just be a one way thing?” He questions, then bites his lip and glances to the others nervously.

Apparently Mr. Clarke begins to go into a rant, because Dustin starts getting that look on his face he gets during school. Mike reaches over the counter and smacks his friend, who rolls his eyes and clears his throat.

“Sir, would you need some sort of conductive materials to create this effect?” He asks, rather smartly, and they all wait patiently as Dustin nods with his eyebrows scrunched together in contemplation. “I want to get all my facts straight, what sort of book doesn’t at least have some sort of basis, Mr. Clarke?” Dustin rolls his eyes, shooting his friends a look that they know fondly as ‘he’s being difficult again’.

“Okay, okay… Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense. I think that’s all I need for now, sir, thank you.” He says with a nod, smiling a little. “See you tomorrow, Mr. Clarke!” He steps over to the receiver and drops the phone down.

“So?” Lucas demands impatiently, gesturing his hands as if trying to physically pull the information from Dustin. He clambers back up onto the stool and drops his head to rest on his hands, smiling brightly and showing off the gaps in his teeth.

“He thinks it’s possible,” He admits, tucking a few of his

fingers into his hair and under his head to scratch at his head. “It’s like a tunnel between your mind and El’s,” He directs this to Will, who’s been quiet and fidgety since the whole radio incident earlier.

“A tunnel?” Will echoes hesitantly, Dustin nods.

“El created the tunnel, it’s still there. We just gotta give you the juice to send her a call.” He smiles again, a little more devious this time. “And I know just how to do it.”

“Okay, well what do we need?” Will asks, more confident in his words this time. He wanted to help; this was how he was going to do it.

`

“Hey, Flo.” Joyce greets easily as she steps into the station, ignoring the young men chattering excitedly with each other at their desks who pay her no attention in return.

“Hello, Joyce.” The older woman smiles brightly, obviously pleased to see her.

“Is Hop here?” She points towards the hall leading to the man’s office, already knowing the answer. She always asked, just in case, but they always met up for lunch on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“As always.” Flo gestures her ahead and she strolls down the hall, knocking on the door. There’s a sort of scuffle behind the door, like always, as Jim hurries to clean up his office of trash or whatever else he has laying around. She waits, a small smile already growing into a bitten off grin. Being around him makes her feel like a teenager again.

The door opens and Jim smiles breathlessly at her, allowing her to slip into the office before shutting it behind her.

“I brought sandwiches and soup.” She informs him, placing the bag on the table before turning and placing a hand on his chest. He leans down and meets her for a soft kiss, she touches his stubble covered jaw and can taste the coffee on his breath. It’s a lot different from Lonnie, who often only tasted of chewing tobacco and cigarettes.

“You didn’t have to go to the trouble; we could have gone out and gotten something.” He tells her quietly, but sits down without prompting. She clicks her tongue and begins to remove the contents of the bag, setting them out and making sure she remembered the proper utensils.

“Jonathan made the sandwiches,” She tells him, Hopper looks intrigued at the comment. “He worries.” She adds with a wave of her hand, and Jim nods his head. There’s a look in his eye, like there’s something on his mind, most likely Jonathan. Will was fond of the older man, and Jonathan was too, the sandwiches were proof of that. But Jonathan had more trust issues than Joyce and Will combined, and lately he’d been distancing himself more than usual. It was obvious that Hopper was trying to connect with him, it just wasn’t working very well.

“Oh, so he doesn’t completely hate me.” Jim says, slightly joking, but there’s a strain in his tone. Joyce sits down across from him, patting his hand comfortingly.

“I told you, Hop. He doesn’t hate you; he likes you better than he likes his own father, for god’s sake.” She sighs, biting into her sandwich and chewing a little in frustration. She was stressed, to say the least, about her boys. They were a little off; the euphoria of Will being home had quickly faded into something similar yet completely different from the past. At first she thought it was just the way things were, but it was starting to feel like something was still wrong that they weren’t telling her. She didn’t like feeling closed off from her boys, they were her life!

“That’s not a very high bar.” Jim says bitterly, he had gotten some details about the end of Lonnie and Joyce’s relationship one late night when he’d come over for dinner. Jonathan had slipped out, Will was over at the Wheeler house, and the topic had come up. Needless to say, it wasn’t a pretty admission, but it felt good to talk to someone about it.

They’re both quiet for a minute, just eating as the tension dissolves between them.

“The boys are okay though, right?” Hopper questions, despite the odd circumstances, he did seem to genuinely like Will and Jonathan. One of the best things about him was his ability to care, it was endless.

“I wouldn’t know, they aren’t talking to each other and

they aren't talking to me," She admits softly, staring down at the bracelet on her wrist. Jonathan and Will had combined some extra cash to get it for her on her birthday earlier that year.

"That's bad, right? You're close." Hopper murmurs, she nods slowly. "Do you think something's going on?" He sets his sandwich down, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Will is much quieter now, since everything… He used to talk so much more." She can remember talking to him while she washed the dishes and he drew at the kitchen table. He didn't have to sit there, but he always seemed to gravitate towards her when they were in the house together.

"What about Jonathan?" Jim reaches across the table and places his hand on hers, covering it with ease. She turns her hand over to grasp his, reveling in the comfort.

"He was always quiet, thoughtful. But now he's secretive, and he's sneaking out late at night and coming home early in the morning. I'm not sure what he's up to, but it can't be good." She shakes her head, placing her spoon in her cup of soup, stirring it idly.

"Think he's doing something illegal?" Jim asks, eyebrows raised.

"No, of course not. At least, nothing serious." She frowns and sighs, shrugging. "I dunno,"

“Maybe he’s sneaking out to see that Wheeler girl, Nancy, right?” He suggests goodheartedly with a frown and Joyce smirks.

“That’s a nice thought, but I doubt it.” She brings over her free hand to pat his, laughing quietly. “Whatever he’s doing, he’s on his own.” She knows it, deep in her gut. Jonathan had a tendency to build up walls, keep others out; he’d done it for years. From a young age, he wanted to play by himself and stay away from the other kids. Hell, he didn’t even start talking until he was four.

Jonathan was different, a lot different than what she expected. But she loved him nonetheless, and she really hoped that Hopper was right. Maybe he was sneaking out to see Nancy Wheeler, or even just a friend. She wished he had someone to go to, someone to talk to. But part of her always knew that he was scared to let people in, and she felt like a failure of a mother because of it.

-

“A nosebleed.” Nancy repeats to Steve with a raised eyebrow and a slight frown on her face, her pen poised over her notebook where she had been taking notes before Steve had come in. Steve shifts nervously on the edge of her mattress, nodding. He felt off about the events that happened with Jonathan, and if it wasn’t otherworldly events then maybe it was something else, but something was wrong.

“I can’t shake it, Nance.” Steve shakes his head, running a hand through his hair out of habit. His fingers settle on his knees to tap nervously, part of him wants to spring into action, the rest of him doesn’t know exactly what he could do.

“Something’s wrong, I can feel it.”

Nancy stares at him a moment, then shifts her books aside to take one of his jittery hands in her own. She brushes her thumb over his knuckles the way he likes, gentle and kind, and looks him in the eye.

“Are you still having nightmares?”

“What? Nancy, we’re all having nightmares for the rest of our lives. This has nothing to do with that, something is wrong with Jonathan.” He emphasizes, shaking out of her grip and standing to pace. “I don’t really know him all that well and I thought maybe you might have seen something, but obviously you didn’t notice!” He waves his hands around frantically.

“Did he tell you something’s wrong?” Nancy questions as she crosses her legs and turns to watch him pace.

“I’ve only known him like a year and even I know that if something was wrong, Jonathan Byers wouldn’t say a damn word to anyone.” He scoffs, crossing his arms and stepping back over to slump down on the bed again.

“Except his brother.” Nancy offers, Steve looks at her imploringly, so she continues. “Jonathan never had any friends before us, Steve. But he loves Will more than anything in the world, if he talks to anyone, he’ll talk to him.” She explains, Steve turns his

gaze to the ceiling.

"Think he'll talk to me about it?" He asks quietly.

"I doubt it; I've been talking to Mike. Will's a steel box with an iron lock; he's not talking about anything having to do with what happened." She shakes her head, adjusting her blouse idly. "He won't talk to Mike; he's not talking to anyone." She tells him.

"Damn it." Steve groans, rubbing his face tiredly. "How did this happen, Nance?"

"How did you fall in love with Jonathan Byers, or how did everything fall to pieces? Because I don't have an answer for either of those." She snickers, Steve scowls and sits up, poking her in the side in irritation.

"That's not funny, it's really not." He can't enjoy the lighthearted banter between them like usual, he's too distracted by damn Byers. In the beginning he was just some prick taking naked pictures of Steve's girlfriend, and then the monster fight happened and everything got turned on its head.

At first, he decided that if Nancy was friends with Jonathan then he'd just have to deal with the guy. But after the fight, they'd spent most of the evening back at Steve's house, waiting for some sort of news. Nancy and Jonathan had taken turns using the phone, getting in contact with everyone. In between calls they had filled Steve in on the recent occurrences, and he'd felt a little left out of the loop because of it.

Alternate dimensions, monsters, a little girl with super powers… He'd missed so much, and he had partially felt jealous of Jonathan for having gone through it all with Nancy. No doubt it would make them closer, and Steve hated that, he hated Jonathan for it.

The moment it all shifted was the phone call Jonathan had with his mother; Steve could still see it so vivid in his head. He had seemed so relieved that his mother was okay, and then he'd slapped a hand over his mouth and his breath had hitched and he turned watery eyes to Steve and Nancy. For a moment, Steve thought that maybe something bad had happened. But then Jonathan had moved his hand and whispered 'He's okay?' into the phone, like if he raised his voice everything would shatter and it wouldn't be true.

That night was the night Steve started seeing Jonathan more as a person than just an obstacle. Jonathan was a loving son and brother, who'd made a mistake taking pictures of a girl getting undressed. It was stupid and creepy and weird, but after a while he sort of realized that Jonathan was an outsider looking in all the time. He didn't quite grasp certain concepts; he was in his own little world. Of course that didn't excuse his mistake, and Jonathan knew that, he apologized to Nancy and even later to Steve.

Steve eventually started popping up wherever Byers just happened to be, they shared a special bond with Nancy. Nobody else in their high school had ever battled a monster from another dimension, if they did, he'd never heard of it before. Sometimes something would remind them, and they'd all share this uncomfortable silence with grim looks. If Steve ever acted like that around anyone else when the lights flickered or someone switched a lighter on, they'd think he was nuts. Who could blame Steve if over time; he started caring about Jonathan Byers?

“What exactly do you think is wrong with Jonathan, again?” Nancy asks cautiously, a good question really. One that Steve couldn’t very well answer other than instinct; he’d always had pretty good instincts. His father always said to never trust your gut, so of course that’s all Steve ever did.

“I don’t know, he’s just different. He seems stressed, worried, something…” He tries to explain weakly, pressing his fingers against each other and staring down at them. “Maybe I’m losing my mind.” He mutters, Nancy smacks him in the arm.

“You’re not losing your mind, Steve. You’re worried about him for all the right reasons, I think if any of us had problems building up it would be Jonathan. He’s not exactly open about his feelings.” She sighs, patting Steve’s back gently. “He might be still dealing with everything, we still are.” She reminds him.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.” He sits back, pulling the girl against his side and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “You’re the smartest girl in the world, Nancy Wheeler.” He smirks, she squeezes his waist tightly.

-

They had spent all of Thursday preparing for what Dustin and Lucas had deemed ‘Operation Use The Force’ which just consisted of the four of them meeting in the woods with some random objects and Mike’s radio to attempt to reach Eleven. The mission would happen on Saturday morning, and Mike felt a little conflicted about it.

Eleven was alive, and that was amazing. But now that they knew for sure, they still had no idea how to get her out of the Upside Down. She was stuck in that awful place, and had been for so long. Will had changed so much after a week there, how would months of exposure affect Eleven? Not only that., but this would be the inevitable return to danger and secrets. Lucas was still vying for telling the others, but Will had held firm on his belief that nobody should know just yet.

Mike wasn't sure why he was insisting on keeping everything hidden, maybe he was worried about his mom and brother getting in the middle of it. But if Mike was Will, he'd want Jonathan and his mother by his side. He still wanted to tell Nancy, but he respected Will's request for now.

"This dinner is quite lovely, Karen, you did a wonderful job." Peter Houston, Ted's manager, compliments politely as they eat. Mike glances over at Nancy, who looks pretty displeased, probably still upset over not being able to see Steve. Mike hadn't seen him around much lately, however a few days before he'd seen him trailing behind Jonathan when Mike was getting milk for his mom.

"Thank you, Peter." Karen smiles brightly, and then looks to the man's wife. "Julie, Ted tells me you work in fashion design, that must be so exciting!" She laughs, sipping her water. Mike rolls his eyes as he looks down, adults are weird. They acted so happy for each other, lied and hid their true selves from one another. He hoped he wasn't like that one day.

"It is, but your town seems to be all we can talk about in the work place." Julie explains, her eyes scanning over each of them

briefly. It catches Mike's attention, but he keeps his eyes on his plate.

"Really? What for?" Karen questions, Peter clears his throat.

"Everyone's all aflutter talking about that young boy that came back to life." He says with a small smile. "It's fascinating, really! Must have been scary for something so awful to happen in such a peaceful place, what was his name again?" Peter looks over at Julie, who hums.

"Will?" Mike interjects, and Peter points to him with a grin.

"That's it! You know him? He must be around your age." He says as he takes another bite of food. He hesitates a moment, unsure, a little unsettled by this strange man. Maybe he was just being paranoid, but it almost seemed as if they were fishing for information.

"He's my friend, yeah." Mike nods, Peter raises his eyebrows.

"Must be great to have him back, then!" He smiles, a little too creepily for Mike's taste.

"Yeah," He agrees quietly.

“There’s been some hoax speculation, considering there was no clear motive to what happened. He just disappeared and reappeared, did he not?” Julie says, eyeing Mike oddly.

“We’ve known the Byers for years; they’d never pull something like that. We’re just glad Will is home safe.” Karen says, shooting Mike a kind smile, he returns it with hesitancy.

“So since then, nothing’s happened? No further investigation?” Peter asks curiously, Karen shakes her head. Nancy is looking over at the couple with the same suspicion as Mike; they share a glance, just to make sure they’re on the same page. Mike knows then, that he’s not the only one that finds this odd.

“Hawkins is glad to leave well enough alone, trust me.” She turns to Holly, coaxing her into drinking her juice. Mike and Nancy continue to look at each other in silent conversation, something was up. Who were these people? His dad had never brought home coworkers before, it was just weird.

“It’s just a little odd, I suppose, right, Ted?” Peter jabs Ted in the arm, who looks up with a smile. He’d obviously not been paying attention, as usual, in his own world.

“Yeah, right!” He agrees hollowly, Mike rolls his eyes and Nancy scoffs quietly, but when they meet each other’s gaze they nod to each other.

“Well, I’m done, and I have homework.” Nancy says a few minutes later, standing from her seat and grabbing her plate. “Nice to meet you both.” She tells Peter and Julie politely, turning and heading into the kitchen.

“Nice to meet you!” They both chime out of tune, Mike stands up as well.

“I’m done too,” He nods, then follows his sister. They both walk up to the sink, dropping their plates in and starting the faucet up.

“Did that seem a little too weird to you?” Nancy asks quietly, Mike nods.

“Weird.” He agrees with a sigh, running a hand through his hair. Nancy crosses her arms and leans against the counter, glancing over at the phone.

“Think we should be worried?” She murmurs with a side eye in his direction, he shrugs in response. “*Has* anything weird been going on lately?” She questions suspiciously to him, narrowing her eyes at him. He opens his mouth, a lie on the tip of his tongue, he stammers.

“I heard Eleven, on my radio.” He confesses after a moment, Nancy’s eyes widen.

“She’s alive?” She demands a little too loudly, Mike shushes her and they both look over at the doorway as if expecting someone to come barging through. After a moment, they relax and Nancy grabs Mike by the arm, leading him downstairs.

“Start talking, right now.” She tugs him in front of her, crossing her arms and blocking the path to the stairs. He steps away from her, sinking down onto the couch, and begins to tell her everything.

-

Steve steps into the house and allows the door to slam shut behind him; he was alone so his mother wasn’t around to tell him not to. He toes off his shoes and drops his backpack near the coat rack, shrugging off his jacket and throwing it onto one of the hooks. He begins to move around the house, turning on lights as he goes. Ever since The Incident he had taken a better liking to having the lights on more, even sometimes when he slept.

He just felt so damn paranoid all the time, like something could creep up on him in the dark. Knowing what was out there made every eerie thought ten times worse, just a distracted thought about an unlocked door could send him into a fit of panic. He rounds his way back to the front door, locks it and makes sure the handle doesn’t twist when he tries to open it.

From a young age, Steve had been obsessed with control. His mother was rather controlling herself, and perhaps that had something to do with it, but he didn’t like to analyze himself. He checks the back door, and then heads into the kitchen as his paranoia is set a little more at ease with the locks in place. His thoughts begin

to wander to other worries, he worried a lot more than he used to.

Everything used to be about how his hair looked, what people thought of him, remembering to have mints in his jacket for when he made out with girls. His life seemed so out of place now, like the world was the same but he was different. Maybe it was because his perspective had been shifted, just like everything else.

He often worried about Nancy, who would be off to college far too soon. Steve of course would be graduating with them (a slip up in eighth grade had gotten him held back), but he had no plans of leaving, he had no plans at all actually. However, Nancy and Jonathan were both still juniors, and that should guarantee they stick around for just a bit longer. But of course, Nancy had been taking advanced courses and doubling up, so she'd graduate ahead of them

He was damn proud of her, but it also stressed him out more than anything else. He didn't want to lose what little stability he had in his life. She wasn't really an anchor as some would describe, not keeping him in place but keeping him level headed. She wasn't an anchor, she was a life preserver. But that didn't mean he wasn't worried about her, with all the flash cards and study sessions, he didn't understand how she wasn't overwhelmed. Maybe it was because she didn't dislike school, enjoyed it even.

His thoughts shift to Jonathan then, who had briefly chatted with Steve about going to New York for college. So very far away, but then again, so was the end of his senior year. Nancy might be leaving him, but Jonathan was stuck here for the time being. It made him feel like an asshole to think that way, but he couldn't lose them both, no way.

If Nancy was a life preserver, Jonathan was a sturdy tree. It was a weird mix of analogies, but he pictured them as two separate scenarios. Nancy was stability, when he felt like drowning she kept him afloat. But Jonathan was sitting under a tree during a sunny spring day, peaceful and comforting. They made him feel safe in two separate ways, and he was beginning to get concerned about relying on one more than the other.

But his problems aside, Steve was worried about Jonathan. His behavior was just slightly different, just the way he felt to be around. The younger wasn't much of a talker, but his body language was everything about him. It felt off, like something was wrong, and he wasn't crazy. At first he'd figured Jonathan was tired of him and was avoiding him, but after talking to him at the movie theatre, that didn't seem to be the case. He knew Jonathan found him annoying most of the time, earning many confused expressions and eye rolls from the smaller boy. But he pretty much irritated everyone, even Nancy.

No, that definitely wasn't it; Jonathan wasn't lying a bit when he said he was glad to see Steve. However, the jumpy behavior, the strange nosebleed, these weren't normal. Everyone had been jumpy after the whole monster thing, nightmares and tense posture for weeks. But it had settled, for the most part at least. Steve still had nightmares sometimes, and he had a tendency to sleep with his door locked and his light on. But that was only when he was alone, which was pretty much all the time… But that was beside the point!

Jonathan had been okay, he'd been more okay than the rest of them actually. He picked back up where he left off, and even tried to return to normal, as if Steve and Nancy would go back to not seeing him or even acknowledging him. Nancy wasn't sure how to react to his out of the way behavior, but Steve could coax even the shyest people out of their shell.

Jonathan was a quiet and pensive guy with an intense stare and a pitiful grasp on social and emotional cues. But Steve didn't mind, because Jonathan had watched out for Nancy, he'd watched out for Steve. You didn't abandon someone once they saved your life; it was like breaking some sort of sacred oath in Steve's book.

But after everything, for Jonathan to get jumpier over time and start acting stranger than usual, that wasn't normal. If anyone knew Jonathan Byers, it was Will Byers, but even he didn't know when questioned. That was the biggest concern, shutting out his family, which was basically what his life revolved around.

So sue him, Steve Harrington was worried about Jonathan Byers.

He pulls himself from his thoughts, leaning away from the counter and opening a cabinet, pulling out the bread and peanut butter. He turns to the fridge and grabs out a bottle of water and the jelly, grape because he isn't some sort of heathen. He sets the jelly near the peanut butter and uncaps the water, tipping his head back to take a sip.

Something moves out of the corner of his eye, a shadow shifting from one side of the kitchen to the other. Steve jerks a little, water spilling over his cheeks and down his neck in a cold rush. He splutters and coughs, looking around frantically for the source of the shadow. He stands there, staring at the other side of the kitchen for an uncomfortably long amount of time, heart racing. Water drips onto the floor, soaks into his shirt, there's nothing around but the shadows on the walls and the still of the evening.

“You’re losing it, Harrington.” He says softly, mostly to comfort himself in the deafening quiet. He sets his water bottle down on the cabinet and returns to his sandwich making, soothing himself with the familiar motions of slathering peanut butter on bread. Another night alone spent the Steve Harrington way, eating crappy snacks and scaring the shit out of himself.

Maybe tomorrow he’d ask Nancy and Jonathan out to the movies, they could hang out and Nancy could get a feel of how Jonathan was acting. Part of him wants her to tell him he’s overreacting, and the other part doesn’t want her to think he’s crazy.

He sticks the pieces of bread together and takes a bite of his sandwich, sighing to himself. He glances around, still the slightest bit on edge from that simple trick of the light. It almost felt like something was watching him, and there was nothing more he hated than that feeling. Unfortunately, it occurred often when he was home alone.

He takes a sip of water and turns on his heel, heading out of the kitchen, unaware of the shadows shifting after he’s gone. The back door unlocking, sliding open silently, and then slipping closed once more with a soft click of the lock.

-

Her panicked breaths echo in the open space, she presses her back against the disgusting mimicry of a tree and tries to quiet herself. It never slowed, never stopped, so neither could she.

Eleven tried to warn them, Will wouldn’t listen, so she’d

had to find someone else. She remembered Will's mom talking to the older boy, the way he worried about his brother, that was who the boys needed right now. At first she didn't remember his name, but she'd pulled it from the recesses of Will's mind with a little effort, Jonathan. They needed protection that she wasn't there to give, and they needed it fast. He could provide it, if only he'd listen!

It was slipping through, finding its way through the cracks she'd worked so desperately to seal up. She was so very tired but she had prided herself in the fact that she was protecting her friends, and now she couldn't even have that. She had to find her way back, without letting anything else following her through.

Footsteps grow closer, a vibration of a growl cuts through the thick air and she pushes herself away from the tree. She pumps her arms and pushes her legs to go faster, if one had found her, the others would soon follow.

2. The Body

Summary for the Chapter:

> Will contacts Eleven, a dead body is found, and secrets are revealed.

Notes for the Chapter:

> (Hey guys! I wanted to update on my eighteenth birthday (the 25th!) but things got crazy so here we are! The third chapter should be up sometime in December, so look forward to that as well. I hope you enjoy the new chapter, please comment below if you do!)

Will doesn't sleep in like he usually does on Saturday, anxiety and anticipation stirring in his gut from the time he had headed to bed all the way into the morning. It had made it hard to sleep and easy to wake up, so by the time the sun is coming up he's staring at the ceiling with his mind racing.

Today was the day they were going to contact Eleven, and he wasn't sure what to expect or how to handle whatever happens. Of course he wanted to help the girl that had so selflessly helped him, but at the same time he wasn't sure what to think of her. She was described as this amazing being with a kind heart and a hard glare, strong and powerful but also very loving. At first he'd been jealous, but it had passed quickly with the amazing stories he was told.

His train of thought is interrupted by his surroundings flickering away into something much more sinister. Familiar walls covered in tendrils of dark vines, a sticky cobweb like substance caking every surface and object around him. The particles swirl in the air like dust in an abandoned and closed off area, one that hasn't been touched for decades.

Will pulls in a shaky breath, clenching his fists at his side and closing his eyes. He puts the breathing techniques Jonathan often coached him with during flashbacks and nightmares to use. These visions or flashbacks happened far more often than they used to, and Will wasn't sure how much longer he could hide them.

After a few minutes, he blinks open his eyes and finds the room back to normal. Will watches the light streaming into the room, catches his breath, and allows his heart to slow. Eventually, he sits up and scans his surroundings. It's a primal instinct, seeking out any sign of the monster he'd spent an entire week hiding from.

"You're home, you're safe." He reminds himself quietly, running a hand through his hair.

He slips out of bed and shakes away the bad thoughts, pulling on his sweatpants and heading out into the hallway. It's quiet; his mother might have already left, but Jonathan is supposed to be home. Then again, Jonathan was supposed to be home a lot more than he really ever was lately.

Will glances into the living room, halting in his steps at the sight of the still form on the couch. He steps into the room silently, standing over his brother lying across the couch. Jonathan's curled up on his side in the slightest, one arm hanging limply off the couch and the other tucked under his head. There's a dark stain of drool on his shirt sleeve, and where his head is pressed against his arm and the couch, his hair is mussed and the usual mess it always is in the mornings. He's dressed in the clothes from yesterday, as if he'd come in and crashed on the couch without even changing.

Will found himself not for the first time, worried for his brother. He just felt off, but of course he couldn't bring it up considering he was different too. Part of him wanted to accept that the whole thing with the Demogorgon had changed each and every one of them, but this felt different. He couldn't accept this as the new reality; Jonathan looked at him like he was a stranger, like he was some sort of body snatcher. It killed him inside; he couldn't even look Jonathan in the eyes most of the time.

The Upside Down had taken a lot of things from him, tainted his life in almost every way possible. But there was no way in hell he would ever let it have his relationship with his brother, it meant much more to him than anything else. Jonathan shouldn't be looking at him like he's some sort of monster waiting to hatch. Will's stomach churns uncomfortably at the mental comparison; he moves a little closer and picks up a blanket that was laid against the back of the couch. He fits it over his brother carefully, and then gently removes the older boy's shoes to set them on the floor.

Will heads into the kitchen to get some cereal, trying to get his mind back on track with the mission. Will was the only connection between their dimension and Eleven, he only hoped he could contact her like they wanted him to. He didn't meet her, but from the way Mike talked about her, she must really be something else.

He'd never mentioned it to the others but, at first he was a little jealous; it was as if in his absence someone had taken his place in the group. He soon came to realize though that she fit into the group in her own way, not to mention that all of his friends were looking for him the entire time he was gone. They had even gotten Eleven in on it, and she had assisted in the search as well, even though they'd gotten a little sidetracked at one point because she was scared for them. That was understandable, and Will respected her for wanting to protect them from the Upside Down. He had no qualms

with Eleven, and if his friends liked her then so would he, he was sure of it.

-

"Good morning, Mrs. Wheeler, is Nancy here?" Steve asks with a flash of one of his most charming smiles as the woman answers the door. She nods her head, stepping back from the door as she greets him.

"Good morning, Steve. She's in the living room with Holly; I'm heading out for a bit." She touches his shoulder and points him in the right direction before walking out the door and shutting it behind her, he steps around the corner and finds Nancy seated and watching TV. Holly is sitting on the floor, playing with a little dollhouse on the carpet.

"Hi Steve!" Holly waves at him, giving him a gap-toothed smile in hello. He waves to her and continues over to the couch, where Nancy is observing him with an amused expression.

"Hey, Steve." She smiles; he walks over and slumps down onto the couch far too close to her, jostling her as he does so. She laughs and shoves at him; he simply drops his head on her shoulder and leans farther against her.

"Hi Nancy." He grins, she rolls her eyes. "So, want to go to the movies today?" He sits up a little, turning his upper half to face her and propping his cheek against his fist. "I'm going over to Jonny's house and asking him in a bit." He explains as she frowns a little at

the news.

"I wish I could, but I'm going into the city with my mom and Holly. Girls day out, shopping, the whole nine yards." She tells him forlornly, he nods his head in understanding.

"That's okay; we'll just have a boy's day out then." He pulls an arm up to flex his muscles jokingly; she laughs and pushes him away by his face. "No girls allowed, they have cooties." He teases, she rolls her eyes again.

"Boys have cooties!" Holly interjects, standing up and toddling over to the couch. She crawls up between them, sitting in Nancy's lap.

"That's right, Holly, they do." Nancy says with a smirk, Steve feigns offense and scoffs.

"You've turned my favorite girl against me, how dare you?" He picks Holly up and tugs her into his lap, beginning to tickle her as she shrieks. There are footsteps hurrying from the kitchen and down the hall, Steve turns his head and watches as Mike pauses in the door with his friends behind him. They're holding an array of things, suspicious things, and each wearing backpacks.

"Where you going fellas?" Steve asks, Mike glances around the living room.

“Out, where’s mom?” He asks of Nancy, who doesn’t seem the least bit curious as to what Mike is doing funnily enough.

“She left, just be careful, yeah?” She says, Mike nods and stares at Steve a moment, calculating.

“Not a word, right Nancy?” Mike asks, still staring at Steve.

“Secret’s safe with me, Mike.” She assures, not faltering even when Steve glares at her. The boys continue on out the door, chattering about supplies and Dustin mentioning something about X-Men. Steve listens to the door slam shut, the house falling still and quiet as Holly slips from his lap and walks back over to her dollhouse.

“What secret?” Steve demands, concerned at the serious tone they had taken with each other. Nancy shakes her head and stands up. Steve follows her into the kitchen, where she pulls out a bottle of water and offers one to Steve, who waves it away.

“It’s a secret for a reason, Steve. Besides, you’d never be able to keep it.” She explains, Steve plants his hands on his hips and scowls at her. What did she mean by that? “I’m serious; you’ll just have to trust me. I’ll tell you soon enough, but not yet.” She says, he crosses his arms and tips his head down towards the floor. What sort of secret might Nancy and Mike be keeping that could be so serious as to not tell Steve?

“I’d better get going to Jonathan’s house, then.” Steve tells

her, a little dejected. Nancy seems a little hurt, but he can't find it in himself to really care. She couldn't trust him with a secret, and that hurt him more than anything else, that she didn't trust him. Would Jonathan trust him with a secret, would anyone?

"I'm sorry Steve," She says as he turns to head out of the kitchen, he shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders.

"It's fine," He mutters, turning his head a little. "See you around, yeah?" He nods his head and she returns the gesture, he walks out of the house, catching a glimpse of the boys disappearing down the street on their bikes. He could follow them, easily, but at the same time maybe Nancy was right. Of course he was frustrated with her now, but she was smart enough to make good decisions. He would know when he was supposed to know, so he gets into his car and backs down the driveway.

Right now, he had a friend to see.

-

"All right, Operation Poltergeist can commence!" Dustin declares proudly after they've dropped their bikes and start arranging the supplies. Mr. Clarke had quite a few ideas on creating energy and connecting to the spirit world, honestly the guy was a bit of a walking nerd encyclopedia. That of course, was why he was their favorite teacher of all time.

"I thought it was Operation Jedi." Lucas objects as he sets a bucket down in front of a chair, Will stands by awkwardly as they

prepare. His nerves are practically shot; he wasn't sure exactly what might come of this situation. Part of him wishes they had convinced him to tell the others, and then maybe Jonathan would be here with him. But then again, he didn't want to stress Jonathan out even more than he already was. He had a lot on his mind obviously; Will didn't want to bother him.

"This sounds cooler," Dustin explains, and they both fall into friendly bickering for the next few minutes as Mike moves the chair closer to Will's fort and under a tree. Will is sat down in the chair and asked to lift his feet so they can place the bucket down, Lucas pours some water in and then Mike follows it up with ice.

Will allows Dustin to fit a tinfoil hat over his head, and then realizes how ridiculous this all is. He glances between his friends, who seem serious about it all, but still feels the slightest bit of doubt.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" He asks hesitantly, the other three exchange unsure glances before looking back to Will.

"We have to try, don't we?" Mike says, and Will nods in agreement.

"For Eleven." He adds, and Mike's eyes light up in the slightest. He smiles at his friend, relieved and grateful for his compliancy. Will never met her, but often he felt like he knew her in some weird way. Maybe they really were connected, as Mr. Clarke had said.

“Yeah, for El.” Mike murmurs.

“All right, feet in the water.” Dustin reminds him, Will nods and reaches down to slip off his shoes and socks. The moment his feet hit the water, a chill rises up his spine and goose bumps cover his arms. He shudders a little, watching everything around him flicker into tendrils and darkness, dust particles in the air. Everything returns to normal after a moment, and his friends are still standing there. Will wonders if that was a sign of something, or a simple flashback.

Mike kneels down next to the lawn chair, placing a hand on Will’s shoulder and slipping a radio into his hand. There’s a certain seriousness about him that Will finds both encouraging and unnerving, there was a lot riding on this.

“She’s got a buzz cut and brown eyes, and last time we saw her she was wearing my jacket and a pink frilly dress.” He informs Will carefully, words slow, trying to get him to form a picture in his mind. “Eleven, she likes Eggos and she broke Troy’s arm.” Will can’t help but smirk a little as the other three laugh quietly in response.

“Must have been great.” He offers, the others add in their murmurs of affirmation.

“He deserved it,” Lucas says seriously.

“Not to mention made him piss his pants.” Dustin adds, and Will feels a little more at ease because of it. He wished he could have seen her in all of her glory, the stories they told were

magnificent, like a comic book or a sci-fi novel. Will closes his eyes and thinks about her, he wants to see Eleven.

A wave of cold washes over him, like one of the more stronger snow storms without the snow melting on his face as it whips against him roughly. He pulls in a startled breath of air and his eyes open, finding himself standing in the dark. He lets out a shaky breath, turning his head slowly to peer around into the seemingly endless void of black. It's an odd experience, as he can clearly look down and see his arms as if it were the plain light of day, but anything beyond there's nothing to be seen.

"Hello?" He calls, jumping a little at the seemingly endless loop of echoes that repeat his call. He glances down and finds the ground beneath his feet covered in a thin sheen of water, cold against his feet. The air is completely still, yet somehow still freezing, almost like he'd been stuck in an icebox. He flexes his hands, stepping forward hesitantly. "Eleven?" He says, a little quieter.

"Will, do you see her?" He startles at the voice echoing around him, and spins in a circle to search for the source of the voice.

"Mike?" He asks, confused. "Where are you?"

"We're right here, man. Can you see her?" He repeats, Will shivers at the way his voice sounds so distant and slightly muffled.

"Uh… N-No… I don't think so at least, it's really dark." It feels almost like the Upside Down, but there's no sign of anything similar to it. Air flows easily into his lungs unlike in that hellish

place, despite the fact that it was rather cold air. “Hello? Is anyone there?” He says, fingers twitching at his sides anxiously.

An ominous whispering begins to build all around him, voices so soft that he can’t catch any real words or recognize them in any way. Will begins to walk forward into the dark, bare feet causing the water on the floor to ripple and splash quietly.

“Eleven?” He murmurs weakly, yelping when something vibrates the ground. He pauses in his steps, shoulders bunching up tensely as his eyes dart around in panic. Another thud sounds, which begins to build into a rhythm, like footsteps.

“Do you hear that? T-That sound? Boom, boom, BOOM!” He remembers Mike’s words clearly from months before, before it all happened. Now that he thinks about it, it was more of a prophecy than anything else.

“The Demogorgon.” He whimpers, the whispers around him grow louder as the footsteps grow closer, but his feet are practically stuck to the ground in terror. He wanted to leave, but how would he get out? “Mike?” He calls shakily, earning no reply.

A hand latches onto his suddenly, and he turns his head to meet dark brown eyes. His next breath catches in his throat as he’s yanked forwards into a sprint, the tall girl in front of him has short brown hair and there’s a hem of a frilly pink dress under a familiar blue jacket.

“Eleven!” He exclaims, exhilaration filling him at the sight

of her. He remembers the current situation then, and turns his head back to find shadows shifting behind them. He picks up his pace, almost running beside the girl as they head through the darkness. As if appearing from a fog, he spots something in the near distance. They head straight for it, and Eleven skids to a stop to pull a familiar sheet back. They crawl inside, panting and gasping as they knock into each other in the cramped space.

Boom, boom, boom!

He wants to ask her so many things, thank her for saving his life, for saving his friends' lives. But whatever was following him nears and he instead tries to control his breathing, squeezing the hand in his. Eleven's face is dirty and gaunt, she looks tired and scared and he really does feel for her. He understands what she'd been through to a certain extent, but he wondered how she had gone on for this long. He had been in the Upside Down for a week and been captured, she'd been doing this for months.

The vibrations stop, leaving only their badly concealed breathing behind and the faint sounds of people's voices. It's like they're just out of earshot, shouting in the distance maybe. Will can see shadows being cast over the sheets and blankets, and he wishes not for the first time that he was half the wizard his character was in Dungeons and Dragons. He could protect himself; protect Eleven and his friends… He could protect his mom and his brother, if he was only strong enough.

Eleven meets his eyes, wary as they scan his face in an intense calculating sort of way. Will notices the shadows have stopped shifting around them, and the footsteps are gone, so he blows out a careful breath.

“Hi, I’m Will.” He offers his hand, which she only hesitates a moment before shaking it gently.

“El.” She greets quietly, her voice is indeed familiar. He remembers her comforting words from long ago, and he hopes that his presence might bring her some of that same feeling. Even if he’s not a strong wizard, he might keep her hoping, keep her fighting. They were looking for her; they’d try their hardest to get her out.

“We’re looking for you, Mike and all of us.” He tells her with a nod, Eleven’s eyes light up a little, but her expression stays carefully still. “We need to know how to get to you, do you know?” He asks, another wave of cold hits him and he curls his hands into fists to fight the chill.

“It’s coming.” Eleven says, rather ominously in fact. She reaches over and takes both of his hands into her own, squeezing them tightly but not enough to hurt. Her hands are colder than his, and he wishes nothing more than to whisk her back to Hawkins and bring her home to his mother. She’d love to have Eleven, she’d said so before, she could stay with them. “Jonathan.” She whispers, and it sends a jolt of panic through Will’s entire being.

“Jonathan? You know Jonathan?” He demands, eyes wide in concern. How could she know Jonathan, they had met once before but very briefly. “What about him?” He asks with fear, she shakes her head slowly. “What’s coming? The Demogorgon?” He squeezes her palms and feels another wall of cold crash into him, shivering with the impact.

“Shadows.” She tells him vaguely, and he shakes his head, not understanding. “You have to go.” She says, he shakes his head a little more insistently. He didn’t want to leave her in this place, all alone, he hated being alone in the Upside Down. He wasn’t sure what this place was, but it was frightening and cold and had a lot in common with the hellish nightmare he had experienced.

“How do we find you?” He asks as she takes her hands from his and grips his shoulders.

“Go!” She demands, eyes dark. “Wake up!” She begins to shake him violently; he clings to her jacket and grits his teeth. “Wake up!”

“Wake up, Will!” He realizes his eyes are closed.

His eyes fly open with a gasp, coughing as light floods his vision and everything spins around him. A canopy of trees and sky above him come into focus, alongside the faces of his three friends hovering over him.

“Jesus Christ, man, you scared the shit out of me.” Dustin sighs, leaning back on his knees and pushing his cap off of his head to run a hand through his wild curls. Lucas and Mike help Will sit up slowly, he realizes he was laying on the ground for some reason. His pants are soaked with cold water, and the bucket and chair are tipped over just a foot away.

Will feels something wet on his lip, and when he brings his hand up to wipe at it he finds it to be smeared with blood.

“Did you see her?” Mike asks, eyes wide with concern as Lucas takes a paper towel and dips it into what’s left of the water in the bucket. He begins to wipe off the blood from Will’s hand, and then hands it to him to clean under his nose.

“She’s hiding in your blanket fort,” Will answers in a slight daze, unsure of how to exactly comprehend what had just happened. Everything felt so real, and yet somehow he had never even left the woods. So where did that make Eleven then, in the Upside Down, or in that place between?

“What?” Mike blinks at him in confusion, face scrunched up. Will takes Lucas’ hand and allows himself to be helped to his feet, holding onto Mike’s shoulder to steady himself.

“In the Upside Down, she’s in your basement. The pillow fort in your basement.” He elaborates, Mike’s puzzled expression slowly turns into a small smile.

“She’s okay, then?” Lucas questions with hope, Will nods his head. The fuzziness in his head begins to clear, leaving behind a slightly drained feeling behind.

“She’s safe, for now, but not for very long.” He explains, watching as the boys step back to let him stand on his own, He feels okay, not sick or anything of the sort, just a little tired. “She says something is coming, she said the shadows are coming.” Will shakes his head, a chill creeping up his spine at his own statement.

“Shadows? What does that mean?” Dustin mutters, Will shrugs in response, unable to answer.

“I don’t know, but it sure didn’t sound like a good thing.” He says quietly, and then glances down at his bare feet. He sweeps a hand over his head and knocks off the tinfoil cap with a sigh. “She also mentioned Jonathan.”

“Jonathan?” The boys all echo in in befuddlement, sharing rather puzzled glances with one another.

“I don’t know, she said his name. They met before, didn’t they?” Will shrugs, they all nod slowly.

“They were in the same room as each other, they didn’t really speak.” Lucas tells him, he finds himself a little more worried at the information. Why was Jonathan involved in this, and did it have anything to do with the fact that he was acting so strange lately?

“Maybe she knows he fought the Demogorgon, maybe she thinks he can protect us.” He suggests weakly, they don’t offer a reply and instead begin to pick up their supplies to head home.

“She didn’t tell you how to find her?” Mike asks after they’ve packed up and walked back to their bikes. He looks rather deep in thought, eyebrows crinkling together in concern. He was worried about Eleven, he probably thought somehow this would bring her back or get them somewhere. But to be honest it left them with more questions than they started out with.

“I don’t think she wants us getting hurt. She’s worried about us, I can feel it.” He touches his chest gently, something inside him that had been thrumming with energy since the connection was made. Mike looks rather taxed about that information, jealous maybe. “But we’ll find her, Mike. I’m with you guys, we’ll find her.” He reassures him, reaching over and patting his shoulder before slipping onto his bike.

“Yeah, man. We’ll get her back.” Lucas says, nodding confidently.

“Definitely.” Dustin chimes in, Mike sighs and nods his head, turning his eyes forward and staying quiet. They were a long way from finding Eleven, but that wouldn’t stop them. They needed to make a plan, and figure out just how to open the gate to the Upside Down once more.

-

Steve parks outside the house and sits in his car for about ten minutes, slowly building courage to actually walk up to the front door. The last time he’d been here, he was trying to apologize to Jonathan and he’d instead stumbled upon a world of nightmares. But he didn’t regret it, because without him Jonathan and Nancy might have died.

After talking to Nancy this morning, he still couldn’t quite keep his mind off of the secrets she had kept from him. Apparently it was big enough to keep a secret in the first place, but why did it have to be kept from Steve? Who was he going to tell? He glances back towards the humble little home he was parked in front of, and it clicks.

Jonathan… Nancy was scared Steve would tell Jonathan something!

What sort of secret would Mike have that would involve Jonathan? The idea of it simply stresses Steve out, maybe it was something involving Will? Jonathan already seemed to be acting strange, what would this secret do to him if it was so important to keep from him?

His thoughts are far too taxed, so he finally decides to get out of the car. He walks through the grass and up to the front porch, the old boards creaking under his feet. He knocks firmly against the wood and takes a step back, waiting.

And waiting…

And waiting…

Steve shuffles anxiously and knocks again, a little louder this time. There's a thud somewhere inside and muffled cursing which grows louder as it gets closer, the door opens to reveal a sleepy-eyed Jonathan with full on bedhead. It's a beautiful sight, eyes glossy and indentions of fabric on his cheek along with a little bit of drool on the corner of his mouth. Steve can't help but smile at the sight.

"Steve?" Jonathan frowns, face scrunching up before he reaches up and starts dragging his hand through his hair to tame it.

He's wearing yesterday's clothes, which is a little odd, but Steve's not one to judge.

"Hey, I was just wondering if maybe you wanted to hang out today." He explains nonchalantly, Jonathan steps back from the door, an invitation inside. He steps into the house with hesitancy, glancing around to find no Christmas lights or ravenous monsters in sight.

"Hang out?" Jonathan yawns, rubbing at one of his eyes and adjusting his shirt.

"Yeah, catch a movie or something. It's like noon, dude, you were still sleeping?" He asks with a smirk, Jonathan blushes in the slightest and ducks his head. "I didn't take you for much of a partier." He jokes; the smaller boy rolls his eyes and runs his fingers through his bands.

"I haven't been sleeping well lately." He confesses with a shrug, Steve feels both concerned for the admission and relieved that Jonathan felt he could confide in him. It always made him feel good when people trusted him, but he wanted more than anything for Jonathan to trust him.

"Yeah? That change last night, then?" He inquires as he steps farther into the living room behind Jonathan, noting the blanket on the floor and the drool spot on one of the cushions. Steve wasn't very bright most of the time, but he was observant. Jonathan had slept on the couch, definitely.

“I guess, I must have passed out after I got home.” He frowns down at the couch, sighing softly. “How’s Nancy, I thought you would have been hanging out with her today?” He questions, sinking down onto the rickety sofa and leaning back, obviously tired.

“Nah, she’s having a girl’s day out with her mom and her sister.” He shrugs it off, sitting down next to Jonathan and slinging an arm over the back. His fingers brush loose threads in the cushions and the springs in the seat are bumpy and rough, he wonders how Jonathan slept on it.

“Oh, yeah, of course.” Jonathan mutters, crossing his arms. Steve feels like he might be moping, which he doesn’t quite understand, but he pats the other’s shoulder.

“I was going to ask both of you to the movies but then she bailed so it’ll just be us!” He explains, and Jonathan seems to perk up a little, glancing over at him. “Guys’ day.” He smirks, watching as Jonathan nodded thoughtfully before casting his eyes to the coffee table in front of them. They fall into a bout of silence, which gives Steve unfortunately more time to ponder his own troubling thoughts.

“You’d tell me if anything was wrong, right?” He asks after listening to the clock in the kitchen ticking so loud that it seemed to control his own heartbeat. Jonathan looks to him in surprise, eyes holding a caution in them that Steve hated to see. They had made significant strides in the past few months, but it almost seemed like Jonathan would never fully trust him. “Right?” He repeats, unsure.

The other boy stares at him, not offering any quick answer. He looks a little haggard, the usual bags under his eyes just the slightest bit more prominent and the rings just that much darker. But

there's more, eyes glimmering with what seems to be guilt. Steve feels unnerved by the accidental staring contest he'd allowed himself to take part in, but Jonathan soon breaks it.

"So you want to see a movie?" He switches the subject without discretion, glancing away and rubbing his hands over his thighs in a telltale sign of anxiety. Steve doesn't even bother to mask his hurt, as Jonathan wasn't even looking at him in the first place.

"Yeah," He says weakly, sighing. "Get dressed; the first showing is at 12:30." He mutters, waving the other away. Jonathan stands up and shuffles out of the room, Steve slumps back into the lumpy couch and rubs his hands over his face tiredly.

What the hell was going on?

-

Eleven hated herself for feeling hope, for seeing Will and finding comfort in the idea that Mike and the boys were looking for her. Mike always made her feel safe and steady since she'd escaped her tiny little facility and stepped into the confusing real world. She wanted to see him again, and Dustin and Lucas. She wanted to meet Will, because if he was worth risking their lives for then he must be something.

Friends protect friends...

She finds herself stumbling through a backyard and racing up the porch steps, grabbing the screen door handle and flinging it open. The shadows were so loud, so many, she couldn't hide from them for very long. But they didn't always follow her, like the monsters. Those she could deal with…

Eleven runs through the house, hearing the distant sound of water running. She turns and heads down the hall, opening one door and stepping inside. There's a bed and clothes all along the floor, covered in webbing of the Upside down and rotting vines covering the walls. She climbs over the bed and slips down to the floor, sliding under the bed and taking a moment to catch her breath.

She can still hear the faint sounds of the world on the other side, which often comforted her in a way. She knew this was Joyce's house, and Jonathan's room, she had followed similar energies back to it. She had followed Will's energy here, and in turn had found Jonathan's. Jonathan's was much weaker, but at the same time it was more open to manipulation. There was a storm coming, and Hawkins needed to be protected. She just had to enlist the closest thing to a protector she could find that she could access through Will.

-

Joyce comes home after a long day to something she hasn't been blessed to hear in quite a while. Sure, after the first few weeks of having Will back, things settled. The adrenaline high of having her baby home dwindled and life fell back into place and eventually returned to almost normal.

Almost.

Now, though, her eldest was even more closed off than before, even when it came to Will. Will himself was different, more isolated and quiet than ever. She was concerned to say the least, her boys were obviously struggling. Jonathan wasn't very talkative in the first place and he never had heart to hearts with his mother like Will did, at least not since he was very little. He bottled it up until it came out in angry bursts, which often reminded her of Lonnie. She would never verbally compare him to his father though; Jonathan was a much better man than his father ever would be. Other than the angry outbursts, they couldn't be more different. Jonathan was much kinder and more sensitive than Lonnie ever was; they just held the same temper.

But this time there was no explosion, no outbursts, just continued distance and avoidance. Joyce had been waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something awful to happen. It still hadn't come, like they were stuck in a loop of infinite quiet stifling. Yet she was currently hearing the beautiful melody of her boy's laughter over the sound of music.

She steps into the house, finding the living room empty. Dropping her purse on the table beside the couch, she hurries down the hall with an excited smile on her face. There are voices coming from Jonathan's room, she wishes she could just peek in and see who he was with without disturbing such an amazing moment.

Joyce waits a moment before the talking gives way to more laughing, not Jonathan's but another voice in a similar pitch. A boy, another boy that wasn't Will, Jonathan had brought a friend over? She knew the events with Nancy Wheeler and her boyfriend, the Harrington boy, but the boy didn't seem like he would get on very well with Jonathan.

She suddenly can't contain her curiosity and raps her knuckles on the door, stepping back and trying to control herself. The music lowers and after a beat, the door opens, Jonathan looks surprised to see her and checks his watch.

"Hey, mom. Sorry, I guess we lost track of time." He admits, and there's this small quirk of his lips as he shrugs, he looks genuinely happy. Joyce peers past Jonathan's shoulder and into the room, and sure enough, there's the Harrington boy sitting with crossed legs on Jonathan's bed. She thinks his name might start with an S, Simon or something of the sort.

"Hi, Ms. Byers." He waves hesitantly, smiling ever so shyly. Joyce didn't know him one bit; she had gone to school with his father, David. He was a popular varsity football player at one point, kind of a dick really. His mother was from out of town, but Joyce remembers that she was a bit of a neat freak. There was a fuzzy memory from a Christmas play in elementary school where she berated her son the entire time beforehand whilst trying to adjust his costume and his hair. David had kept telling him to stand up straight, and the boy had looked downright miserable under the harsh attention.

It really explained his perfectly detailed hairdo now, his neat clothes and neat posture. He looked out of place in Jonathan's messy room, but he didn't seem bothered by it one bit. In fact, he looked at ease sitting on Jonathan's mattress.

"Hello, I was just wondering where your brother was." She lies easily, Jonathan frowns and there's a flash of worry in his expression that sends a bit of panic through Joyce's chest. She'd probably never recover from that feeling, that on edge fear that came with the once jeopardized safety of her baby boy.

“He spent the day with his friends; I can go pick him up.” He offers without hesitation, Joyce feels proud that her son was still so family oriented, but she doesn’t want to ruin his rare good time. She holds up her hand and shakes her head, patting his chest when he stammers an objection. “You… You’ve been working all day, I’ll do it.” He assures.

“Have fun with your friend, sweetie. I’ll be back.” She turns and heads down the hall, listening to quiet murmurs as the door closes once again as she grabs her purse and walks out the door.

-

Jonathan had never spent much time with Steve; they hadn’t hung out outside of school other than the occasional study session at Nancy’s house together. Sometimes Steve would slip into the dark room at school while Jonathan was in there; he always expected Harrington’s meaningless chatter and be pleasantly surprised when he stayed mostly quiet.

But this was something different entirely; the movie had been nice, even if Steve kept leaning over to whisper weird things to him about the scenery or heckle the script. They had been quiet on the way there, but by the car ride home, things had gotten a little less tense. Come to find out, Steve liked some of Jonathan’s favorite bands! Of course not all of his music taste was that good, they listened to Toto on the way home and Jonathan had scowled while Steve had belted out the lyrics. Jonathan would never admit to smiling, no matter how much Steve insisted he did.

“I remember that! Stacy couldn’t get the stain out!” Jonathan’s eyes are wide, a smile forming on his face. “Some guy spilled punch all over her, she was devastated!” Steve laughs and drops his head back against the bed.

“Guilty, I ran into her.” He admits, Jonathan snorts and leans back in his chair. It wasn’t that he hated Stacy, it was that Stacy had hated Jonathan. He had actually asked her to a dance in middle school and she’d flat out humiliated him in front of everyone. “Well, Tommy pushed me, but that doesn’t matter.” He waves a hand with a sigh; Jonathan can’t help but frown a little. They fall quiet for a moment, only the music playing quietly.

“Why… Why were you friends with him?” He asks gently, Steve sits up on his elbows, observing Jonathan with intense thought before he shrugs.

“We grew up together; we just got along…. He’s just as obnoxious as I am.” He admits quietly, Jonathan turns his eyes to the desk, unable to keep his slightly sad gaze. He thought he knew everything about everybody. He thought he knew everything about Nancy Wheeler, and that she was acting like a stuck up snob just to fit in. He also thought Steve Harrington was just a pretty-faced asshole with a huge ego.

He saw what he wanted to see, he was treated unfairly for years and that was wrong, but that didn’t give him a right to judge other people just as unfairly. Nancy Wheeler wasn’t some normal girl trying to fit in, she was a unique person that happened to fall in with some bad people. She was her own person, strong, smart, brave, and not to mention the best damn shot Jonathan has ever seen.

Steve Harrington might act like a douchebag, he might have made mistakes, but at least he was man enough to own up to them. Not to mention the things that nobody dared mention but everyone knew. Like his parents, whose romance was cracked and fractured but they couldn't let each other go for appearance sake. Like the empty house that Steve went home to for weeks at a time, and had been doing so for about two years now.

Jonathan understood what it was like to feel lonely; he knew it all too well. He just didn't realize that one of the most popular kids in school, who had friends and partied, was just as lonely in his own way.

He stares down at his lap, picking at his fingernails and resisting the urge to stick them in his mouth to chew and bite at them. A nasty habit that often came to him in stressful or anxious times, no matter how hard he tried to quit it always reared its head in the worst of times.

"Tommy is definitely more obnoxious than you." He offers with a huff, looking over when Steve sits up. It wasn't much of a statement, but he had to make sure Steve understood that he was a better man than Tommy.

"Yeah?" Steve asks with a small smile, Jonathan nods.

"By a fraction, of course." He jokes; Steve rolls his eyes and grabs one of Jonathan's pillows, chucking at him. Jonathan flinches against the impact, but laughs nonetheless and flails to catch it before it hits the floor.

“Shut up, Byers!” Steve grins, yelping when Jonathan tosses the pillow back just as hard and it smacks him in the face. “Watch the hair!” He scolds, and his hands come up to gently touch his ever perfect hair to make sure it wasn’t messed up.

They continued their conversation into the afternoon, until a knock came at the door. Jonathan hadn’t realized how long it had been; about three hours spent talking with Steve. His mother had been at the door, smiling a little too much and giving Jonathan those hopeful eyes. She was happy he had a friend, that he wasn’t spending alone, but she’d never say it aloud.

His cheeks were red with embarrassment by the time she’d told him to spend time with his friend and scurried off to pick up Will. He shuts the door and turns around to look at Steve, expecting some sort of taunting for being called ‘sweetie’ by his mother.

“She seems nice,” Steve says instead, and there’s that slightly sad look in his eyes again. Jonathan might have a hard working mother that wasn’t around much, but at least she cared, at least she showed her love. He could only name a handful of times he’d seen Steve’s mother at school events, and most of the time she was complaining and trying to fix Steve. Jonathan could sympathize with him in those respects, as he’d spent years trying to prove himself to his father.

“She’s great.” Jonathan tells him honestly, and sits down on the bed. He taps his fingers on his knees, a thought forming in his mind. He opens his mouth before he can second guess himself. “Do you want to stay for dinner?” He glances back at his friend, who raises his eyebrows and makes a sort ‘uh’ noise, Jonathan scrambles to continue. “If you want, you know.” He mutters, looking away.

“No, yeah, that sounds cool.” Steve says, slipping off the bed. “Do you need any help?”

-

Will rubs his fingers up and down the sides of the radio, too distracted to actually pay attention to the horror movie playing on the basement TV screen. Something scary must happen because Dustin yelps and covers his eyes; Mike ducks his head against Will’s shoulder and grips his shirt.

All he can think about is Eleven, her dirty face and soulful eyes. That warm feeling of the connection had dissipated in the slightest, leaving Will with a hollowness feeling in its place. He couldn’t help but go over exactly what happened in his mind, play it back like his favorite episode of Star Trek.

Why had she said Jonathan’s name? It was random, and after they had talked and brainstormed plans for a few hours once they got home, nobody could come up with an answer. Mike was going to inform Nancy about contacting Eleven, she had come home late with their mother and Holly and gone straight to her room with the shopping bags they’d acquired in the city.

Will should probably tell Jonathan about everything as well, but he doesn’t want to mess with him anymore. It seemed like he was already crumbling a little under it all, something that Will never really focused on before the Upside Down. He saw things before that he never quite put together, dark circles under eyes and the snappy attitude he often came home with.

He didn't want to bring another monster into Jonathan's life, didn't want him or his mother to worry. But if they didn't find out from him, they'd find out from Nancy probably. They wanted to tell Hopper so they could get his help, but they were hesitating over it. He might ban them from investigating; try to keep them out of it like he usually did.

Will likes Hopper; he's a nice guy with a sad past. He didn't drink himself into a stupor like he used to, like Lonnie did when he still lived with them. He made their mom smile, and Will could tell Jonathan appreciated that just as much as he did.

But Will didn't want to bother anyone with any of this; he wished not for the first time that he were older and stronger. Then again, Jonathan was older and still seemed to be falling to pieces. Maybe it was better to stay a kid, because it was almost like adults tended to lose their minds over certain things.

The basement door opens and Mike scrambles off of the couch to turn off the TV. Karen Wheeler comes down the steps and leans down to spot them.

"Will, honey, your mom's here." She informs him, he nods.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler." He stands up and grabs his bag, turning to Mike and offering him the radio. Mike stares at it a moment, as if conflicted, before waving his hand.

“Keep it,” He says, and Will shoves it into his bag without a reply. He had his own, but this one was different, this one had been with Eleven. It was connected to her, to him, like a phone between worlds. Maybe if he tried hard enough, got enough practice, he could contact her whenever he wanted. At least, that was Lucas’ theory.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Wheeler!” He says as he passes her; she waves to him as he steps out onto the front porch and closes the door behind himself. His mother is waiting at the bottom of the porch, smoking a cigarette as usual. “Where’s Jonathan?” It comes out a little more blunt than he intended it to be, but Joyce simply smiles.

“He’s back at the house with a friend.” She tells him, Will’s eyes widen with surprise. “The Harrington boy, Steve?” Steve was hanging out with Jonathan? Sure Steve had asked him about his older brother, but he didn’t really expect them to hang out. Steve Harrington, high school douchebag, hanging out with Will’s older brother? It seemed like some sort of fever dream.

“He was over here yesterday; he said he was worried about Jonathan.” He explains honestly, Joyce’s eyes crease with concern.

“Come on, let’s go.” She places a hand behind his neck and ushers him over to the car, and the engine splutters to life when Joyce twists the key in the ignition. “Is your brother all right?” She asks, not for the first time. Will sinks back into his seat, frowning out the window in thought.

“I don’t know, we don’t really talk anymore.” He admits, embarrassed and sad at the same time. Jonathan was his best friend in the whole world; he was more of a father than their actual father. He took care of Will, fought to get him back, worried about him. And

now he was pulling away, as if Will was somehow no longer important.

"I'd say it's just teenager angst, but to be honest I really don't think it is." Joyce confides in him with a soft sigh, Will nods in agreement. It was true, sure Jonathan had been quiet and brooding for years, but this was different. A little unhappy and quiet was completely different from secluded and withdrawn.

Something in his mind, the scared little boy part, urges him to tell his mother about what's going on. She could involve Hopper; they could figure this all out! But then she might not like him contacting Eleven, and he couldn't allow that to stop. He needed to help her, prove that he was worth saving.

They pull into the driveway in a few minutes and Will hops out, unsure of what to expect when he walks inside. Jonathan never had friends over, sometimes Will was positive he didn't have any friends at all. But to be friends with Steve Harrington was a whole other level of weird for Jonathan.

"Steve, don't!" Jonathan's voice warns from somewhere in the kitchen, but there's amusement in his tone.

"Come on, Jonny!" There's a scuffle and Steve laughs, Will moves forward and slips into the hallway. He peers into the kitchen doorway, spotting the boys standing near the counter. Steve has something in his hand and is cornering Jonathan with it; the taller boy darts forward and they're both shouting and laughing as they struggle with each other's arms. Steve's hand moves to Jonathan's neck and he shoves whatever he's holding down Jonathan's shirt. Before Jonathan can grab at him, he darts away with a wicked grin

on his face.

"No!" Jonathan yelps, actually yelps. He quickly untucks his shirt and a piece of ice clatters to the floor. "You're a dick." He pants, and then hisses in what seems to be pain as he glances down at his hand.

"What?" Steve asks, stepping closer.

"I think I cut my hand on the counter." He says with a sigh, Steve suddenly pushes into the shorter boy's space again.

"Let me see," He takes Jonathan's wrist into his hand and observes his palm with scrutiny. Will feels a little taken aback at the show of gentleness and tactility, it seems Jonathan is too. He's staring at Steve in awe, mouth open in the slightest and eyes shining with emotion. Will jumps a little when a hand touches his shoulder, turning his head to find his mother smiling at him.

"Boys, we're home!" She says as she steps into the kitchen, Will expects Steve to dive away from his position in an attempt to conserve his reputation, but he continues his observation of Jonathan's hand. Jonathan looks a little like he wants the floor to swallow him up, but he doesn't move from Steve's reach while the other grabs a paper towel and runs it under water to dab it gently on the cut. "What happened?" Joyce asks.

"It was my fault, Ms. Byers. We were roughhousing." Steve says honestly with a shake of his head, and then steps back to throw the paper towel away. "Got any Band-Aids? It's just a cut, no biggie."

He assures, propping his hands on his hips and looking around.

Oblivious, Steve was totally oblivious to how weird his behavior was just then. No guy looked after his guy friends like this, excluding Will and his friends of course. In most people's vocabulary in Hawkins, it was kind of queer. Jonathan's cheeks are a little red, looking down at the sluggishly bleeding cut on the edge of his palm.

"Here, I'll show you." Jonathan slips past Steve, who follows him down the hall towards the bathroom. It was obvious that they were in the middle of cooking dinner, although it was a little messier than usual, which was probably Steve's doing.

Will meets his mother's eyes, who is giving him a certain look that is asking him a question but begging him not to answer it aloud. He shrugs a little, and then dips his finger into the spaghetti sauce to taste it. Joyce prods his youngest son in the side for his manners, he squeaks and steps away.

"It's awful kind of you to help with dinner, Steve." Joyce tells him when they both return, Jonathan looking a little less red and Steve seeming a little more awkward.

"I've always liked to cook; it's messy and fun, what could be better?" He grins, slipping back into his cool and likeable ways.

"I couldn't agree more," Joyce grins, and they fall into light conversation as Jonathan continues stirring the sauce and Steve checks the noodles. Joyce asks questions; Steve answers them and fires some of his own back. He gets on well with everyone, Will

notes; it's probably how he was so popular. Sure he was a little cheesy and annoying, but it was a charming irritation that you couldn't exactly bare to ignore.

Mike never liked Steve because of the things they heard from the grape vine, the way he was the head of a gang of assholes. It was the way they made Jennifer Thomas cry because they wrote dirty things about her in the boy's bathroom wall, and did so many horribly things he really didn't understand the point of. But this didn't seem like a guy that would dod that, not this guy. Not the guy that showed up to Jonathan Byer's messy house and hung out with him, made dinner with him, roughhoused with him like they were best friends. Jonathan wouldn't be friends with an asshole, which was what confused Will the most.

So maybe he wasn't that bad, maybe after it all happened, Steve changed. There had been a rift in the popularity chain, Steve wasn't friends with his little gang anymore, maybe he regretted his actions from before.

"You know the best way to check to see how good the sauce is?" Steve asks Will directly, who shakes his head with hesitancy. Steve pulls him over to the stove and sits him on the counter. He must like handling people; maybe it wasn't a queer thing. He stirs the pot with a spoon, lifts it up and dips his finger into it.

"That's disgusting!" Jonathan scolds, thumping Steve on the shoulder.

"I'm not done, leave me be!" Steve swats at his hand with the spoon when he reaches over and sauce splatters on Jonathan's hand. Jonathan only laughs a small noise with a grin of teeth,

something Will had missed quite a lot. “Okay, now close your eyes.” He instructs, when Will warily observes him he raises an eyebrow. “I don’t have all day, nerd.” He mutters, Will rolls his eyes and closes them.

“Now you have to smell it while you taste it.” And then a finger rubs over his lip and sauce drips onto his face.

“Gross!” Will opens his eyes with a laugh, licking his top lip and smelling the sharp spice of the sauce. It wasn’t half bad, amix of store bought with something else thrown in. Jonathan was very by the book with what he cooked, so it must have been Steve’s addition.

“But how is it, though?” Steve asks, stirring the pot again. He’s smirking a little, glancing over at Jonathan with a smug look on his face. Jonathan looks nonplussed, leaning against the counter with an eyebrow raised.

“It’s good,” Will admits, and Steve laughs.

“Of course it’s good, that’s because I made it. That’s the best way to know if it’s good!” Steve shrugs, Will gapes at him.

“You just rubbed sauce on my face for nothing!” He shoves Steve lightly, slipping off of the counter with a laugh. He looks over at his mother, who’s seated at the counter with a smile on her face. She was just happy to see her boys happy, probably. Man, Steve was earning major brownie points at the moment.

“All right, enough playing, master chef.” Jonathan waves Steve away and continues with his work, the taller boy sits down on a stool next to Joyce and Will scrambles up onto the seat on his other side. Steve couldn’t be as bad as they’d assumed, not when he was making faces at Will and occasionally leaning over the counter to poke Jonathan just in an attempt to get a response out of him.

He was just a kid, a playful kid that was having the time of his life just hanging around the Byers’ house. It was weird, but Steve was genuinely having a good time, Will could see it on his face. Will always knew Jonathan could take care of himself, but it felt nice to think that maybe someone else had his back.

-

Ring… Ring… Ring…

He turns over onto his stomach, covering his head with a pillow to block out the noise. It was too early, no phone calls, the station could wait.

Ring… Ring… Ring…

“Damn it!” He rolls over and scrambles for the phone, knocking over a bottle of pills in the process. He sits up as he places the phone to his cheek. “What? What do you want?” He snaps, rubbing a hand over his face as he pries his tired eyes open.

“Sir, you need to get down here. We have a situation.” Flo tells him seriously, he frowns and clears his throat, blinking into the darkness until he can clearly see his alarm clock.

4:38

"What's going on?" Jim asks, feeling a bit of anxiety begin to build in his chest. Before it all happened, he would have found a call like this to be nothing. But he still had doubts, feelings that their battle was far from over.

"A boy has been killed, his body was found on the side of the Elm Street." His throat swells shut, images of Jonathan and Will Byers flashing in his mind. They might not be his kids, but he had a fondness for them, they were good boys.

"Who?" He demands, he can hear people talking on the other side of the line. He stands up and grabs his jeans.

"Troy Matthews, the little boy who came in with his mother about the fight and the broken arm?" He frowns and pauses in buttoning his jeans, the bully kid? Sure he'd heard some things about Troy from Joyce, and the kid was a bit of a prick, but that didn't mean he deserved to die.

"What happened?" He asks, sitting down when his pants are fully on.

"Apparently he seems to have been mauled by something, coyotes or a cougar or something. But that's not the problem, sir." He shakes his head, how is this not a problem? A boy was dead! What other problems could they be having?

“What do you mean?” He sighs, rubbing at his forehead and dropping his elbows onto his thighs to lean over.

“Joyce’s boy Jonathan found the body, and it doesn’t look good.” He’s standing suddenly, hand tight around the phone.

“Don’t do anything until I get there, don’t let anyone talk to him.” He instructs sternly, before hanging up. He grabs his undershirt and his uniform top, slipping it on before grabbing his gun holster. Jonathan Byers had found the dead body of the boy who used to pick on his little brother; this wasn’t good in the slightest.

Everyone knew that Jonathan Byers was a little odd, even Jim had seen it. Of course now, he knew better, he was just a little awkward and shy. Not to mention who his father was, who probably was part of the root of the problem. It wouldn’t take long for people to think he did it, for them to accuse a sixteen year old boy of murder.

-

Jonathan isn’t sure what happened, he just couldn’t sleep. The night Steve had come over was nice, and he’d slept like a baby after it. But the next, things were back to normal. He couldn’t sleep so he decided to go out for a drive. The lack of sleep was really getting to him, he saw things in his dreams that kept him from falling asleep. Black tendrils covering everything and the screeching echoes of something not human rang in his ears. It wasn’t like anything bad could come out of driving around in the dark, at least that’s what he thought.

He'd seen the mass on the side of the road from afar and figured it an animal, but he'd pulled over fast when he saw a pale hand splayed out on the black road. He could barely recognize the kid, but he was crying by the time he'd drank in the sight of him. The dickhead kid that tormented Will and his friends, but it reminded him of so many dreams he had of Will.

Troy, which was all he knew him as, just Troy. One of his arms bent in an awful angle, head craned awkwardly, body in a heap of bloody shreds. His stomach had roiled at the sight, fear and horror filling him before he turned and vomited in the road, knees buckling under him. A little boy, he was just a little boy! The worst part was his face, cheek slashed and jaw hanging open in a silent scream, eyes soulless but yet still capturing the final moment of fear. This boy had died afraid, and most certainly in pain as well.

Jonathan ran back to his car and got inside, images stuck in his head, flashing through his mind until he couldn't breathe. Panic crushing his chest, tears stinging his eyes and dripping down his face as he gripped the steering wheel. He'd sobbed and screamed and even banged his fists against his head a couple of times just to get a grip on himself.

It had taken a while to calm down, and then he'd shakily started the car and driven straight down to the station. So now, here he was, sitting on a chair in Hopper's office and shivering because he was freezing no matter how warm it was in the station. He felt empty, broken and hollow. Part of him feels like bursting into tears again, but the rest of him can't muster the energy too.

Soulless eyes staring into his, final moments etched into a

lifeless face, petrified and crying for help.

The door opens and he jumps, looking back and finding Hopper stepping inside. He knows he must look a mess by the expression the older man has, and he sort of figured it out before. He'd cried for a while, his eyes were kind of irritated and probably tinted pink. He'd hunched over and started hugging himself in an attempt to calm down as soon as he'd sat down, and he wasn't about to pull himself together just for Jim Hopper.

"You okay, kid?" Hopper questions uselessly, standing before him.

"I was just out for a drive," He tells him quietly, instead of answering. Jonathan wasn't okay, and that was plainly obvious; the question might as well have been a rhetorical one.

"It's really late, it's not that I don't believe you, but we both know this doesn't look good." He explains, leaning against the desk and giving him a look that was much too intense for Jonathan to hold for more than a moment. He hated eye contact; it stressed him out more than social interaction, although not by much.

"I can't sleep; I've been sneaking out to the quarry and drinking." He says honestly, he would rather get in trouble for drinking than murder. Jim's eyes soften with concern, in a way that Jonathan could never remember Lonnie's ever doing. He never cared about them; he cared about the idea of perfect sons who were just like him.

"Are you drunk right now?" Jim asks, kneeling down with

a little effort. He reaches for Jonathan, who flinches back in the slightest, so he holds his hands up in a peaceful gesture. The older man takes Jonathan's chin into his calloused hand and observes his eyes.

"I didn't… didn't make it to the quarry; I was on my way there." He mutters hesitantly, leaning away from Jim, who takes the hint and stands to back away. "There's a half bottle of whiskey under my seat, I didn't do this, Hop." Jonathan promises, Jim nods and pats his shoulder before sighing.

Jonathan taps his fingers against his arm, the other hand coming up so he can bite on his fingers a little. It calms him down, always had, and probably always would. He was a quirky kid, which was really the reason other kids and a lot of parents as well didn't like him. He was just slightly off, enough to make people uncomfortable. That meant he was the perfect one to accuse for things like this.

There's a moment where he thinks about his mother and Will, and there's a thought in his head that he can't even begin to fathom. He doesn't want his family right now, he wants Steve and Nancy. They were his friends, they had seen the monster. Not like Will, Will's trauma was different, like his mother's. Nancy and Steve had experienced what he had. Sure he hadn't seen Nancy around that much lately, but her calm and steady thinking paired with Steve's easy distraction of humor would be absolutely perfect now.

"I'm gonna go settle this, you stay here. Your mom should be here soon." Jim tells him, and Jonathan wants to open his mouth and object. He wants Nancy and Steve, wants his friends, but he'd sound like a complete and total freak by breaking down and asking for some girl and a girl that wasn't even his girlfriend. So he just nods

and ducks his head, waiting until after Hopper has left to bury his face in his hands.

-

Joyce gets the call late at night; she had come home earlier and found both of her boys asleep in bed. She always made sure to check in with her boys whenever she could, and never went to bed without checking on them.

But when she wakes up to find Hopper calling her and explaining that Jonathan had stumbled upon a body of one of Will's school bullies, her stomach is immediately restless with nausea. Of course she doesn't think Jonathan did such a thing, he was the sweetest and most gentle boy she'd ever met besides Will. Of course he had his moments of anger and distress but he would never hurt anyone, she had been in shock when he'd gotten into a fight with that Harrington boy.

Jonathan wasn't violent, he was good natured and kind and he wasn't a murderer. But that wouldn't stop everyone from thinking it. She's already thinking about possibly sending Jonathan away to his grandmother's for a while on the way to the police station, worried that someone might hurt him. But at the same time she knows that he has to finish school, and he wouldn't want to be away from his friends.

His friends… Nancy and Steve, would they believe the lies people made up and shun Jonathan? She felt as if her life were falling apart all over again, and could only hope to God that everything would work out. She didn't want her sons being harassed but something like this could end in one of them being seriously injured.

When she arrives at the station, every one of the cops gives her looks of pity. Flo smiles sadly at her, and then Jim is coming out of his office and pulling her into a hug.

"It's okay; I'm going to make sure this all goes away." He mutters, she nods against his chest and squeezes him tightly as he combs a large hand over her hair. "The boy's family is going to be here soon, we called you first so you could get Jonathan out of here." He explains, she steps back from him and nods.

"Where's my boy, Hopper?" She asks, Jim points behind himself towards his offer, she slips past him and into the room. The door is shut quietly behind her; she takes in the sight of her son. Folded over, rocking back and forth in the slightest and sniffling quietly with his face in his hands. Her sweet and sensitive boy was caught up in something far bigger than him, just like before. She hated this town for hurting them, for hurting Jonathan and Will.

"Sweetheart," Joyce kneels next to him, and Jonathan looks up with watery eyes and a miserable expression. She gathers him up in her arms, remembering many times she'd done it before when he wasn't so big.

"I'm sorry, m-mom…" He mumbles against her shoulder, Joyce shakes her head and shushes him, rubbing his back comfortingly.

"This is not your fault, baby." She assures, and kisses his shoulder. She gives him a moment to get himself together before pulling away; she digs in her purse and pulls out a tissue, wiping his pink tinted tear smeared face. "Now, what were you doing out so late? When I came home you were asleep." She murmurs.

“I had a nightmare; I couldn’t get back to sleep… I stole…” He looks guilty then, hands clenched in the thighs of his jeans. “I stole a bottle of whiskey from the liquor cabinet; I’ve been drinking out at the quarry cliff.” He whispers, she feels a heavy stone settle in the pit of her stomach. Joyce feels like a failure of a mother, her boys locking her out, her eldest sneaking around and drinking to solve his problems.

“Were you driving drunk?” She asks, deciding not to dwell on it too much.

“No, I sleep in my car. I’d never…” He shakes his head, more tears building in his eyes that slip down his face. “I was on my way there…” He pauses in his words, glancing away. “It was awful; I can’t get his face out of my head.” He mumbles, sniffling and wiping at his eyes roughly.

Joyce can’t even fathom what’s happening; Jonathan had been driving out to the quarry and passing out in his car? What sort of mother was she for not noticing him being gone all night? This never would have happened if it weren’t for her, none of it would have. She always put everything on Jonathan’s shoulders, and he took everything without complaint. Her sweet little boy that used to smile so much and laugh so freely, reduced to a broken young man carrying the weight of the world.

“I’m so sorry, honey.” She pulls him into another hug. “Let’s go home, yeah?” She coaxes him into standing and wraps her arm around his back, noticing how badly he was shivering. “We can go home and make some cocoa and maybe you can get some sleep.” She leads him out of the office, offering a nod to Jim and a

halfhearted smile to Flo before stepping outside.

Joyce didn't know what was going on, but there was no way she was going to let one of her boys slip through her fingers again.

-

"Did you hear?" Tammy says when she walks up to Nancy, eyes wide. She frowns, shaking her head as she continues to place books in her locker. She had only just gotten to school, prepping for a new week. Her school work had become top priority this year, she was practically buried in it and she had little time for other things around her.

She needed to talk to Steve and Jonathan about what was going on. Mike had pulled her into his room on Sunday morning and explained that somehow Will had contacted Eleven through some weird way they had pieced together with help from their science teacher. She couldn't believe Will hadn't told Jonathan yet, they were always so close, but then again Steve had said Jonathan was acting odd and Mike had said the same about Will.

She parts her attention back to Tammy, who wasn't as much of a friend as she was the head of gossip at school. Her father was one of the men down at the police station, so she always had the first scoop on the town scandals.

“A kid from the junior high is dead, and that Byers kid was the one that called it in.” Tammy mutters, glancing around as if she might spot him. Nancy’s heart quickens with worry, Jonathan had found a dead body?

“What kid??” She questions, closing her locker. Tammy tucks a strand of perfect blonde hair behind her ear and leans into Nancy’s space.

“Kim Matthews' little brother, Troy Matthews, you know! The one that picked on Byers’ little brother? I heard he killed him.” She hisses, Nancy shakes her head. No way, there was no way Jonathan Byers could kill someone. He might be a little short tempered and awkward, but he wouldn’t kill someone in cold blood unless provoked.

Tammy’s boyfriend Chad, a boy on the varsity football team, approaches them.

“Freak just got here.” He mutters, and then smirks at Nancy viciously. “It looks like your boyfriend is cheating on you with a murderer.” He laughs; she turns on her heel and makes a beeline for Steve and Jonathan.

Jonathan’s got his shoulder against the wall, looking tired and more haggard than ever. Steve is close in his space, talking quietly, looking worried. Nancy knows she hasn’t had much time to hang out with either of them, but it didn’t mean she didn’t care about Jonathan.

“Are you okay?” She asks when she approaches, Jonathan pushes off the wall with a silent nod and she lurches forward to pull him into a hug. His hands are gentle on her sides, hesitant and soft, which just reaffirms her belief that he couldn’t have done this. “What the hell’s going on?” She whispers when they pull away, ignoring the blush on Jonathan’s face.

“I think something’s happening…” Jonathan tells them, looking around as if checking for eavesdroppers, he looked nervous and tired. “If I tell you guys something, you can’t think I’m crazy.” He mutters, Nancy and Steve share a look and nod their agreement. They had seen some seriously unbelievable things, pretty much nothing Jonathan said would be impossible to believe.

“Of course, man. What’s going on? Is that Dema-whatever back?” Steve asks, shifting anxiously and gesturing his hands frantically.

“I don’t know, but lately I’ve been-“ He sighs, rubbing a hand over his face and through his hair, which looked extra messy today. “-hearing things, seeing things….” He explains with his voice a hushed mumble, biting his lip. “I thought I might just have been losing it, but after seeing Troy…” He glances down at his hands, thumb smoothing over the scar on his palm that was almost identical to the one on Nancy’s.

“Damn it, Jonny! Why didn’t you tell me?” Steve hisses, and then grabs each of them by the hand and leads them over to the Photography Club dark room. Jonathan pulls out his keys and unlocks the door; they slip inside and close the door behind them.

Nancy isn't quite sure when Steve and Jonathan became such good friends, for the last few months it seemed like Steve was intent on being Jonathan's best friend. She knew they had hung out at some point recently this weekend; she had to turn down the invite for other plans. Steve was trying hard to get Jonathan to trust him. But Jonathan hadn't even flinched at the nickname 'Jonny' so that was saying something.

"Start talking, now." Nancy demands when the door is shut, leaving them bathed in a soft red glow. Jonathan's shoulders are hunched up a little, hands in his pockets and head ducked in the slightest. He looked like a scolded child, and Nancy realizes he tended to always look like that, like he was ready to get yelled at.

"Well after we got Will back, things were okay… Well, not okay…" He shakes his head, pulling his hands out of his pockets to pick at his nails. "We had nightmares, I couldn't sleep… But then it got better, like everything was getting back to normal… But Will wasn't, he isn't, something's off." He explains softly, flexing his hands into fists and out of them anxiously.

"He was traumatized; he's going to be different." Nancy says skeptically, crossing her arms. Jonathan seems frustrated then, he shakes his head again and rubs his cheek irritably.

"On Friday, when I got that nosebleed?" He looks to Steve; Nancy follows his gaze in confusion. Nosebleed? Steve simply nods, obviously following and seeming to be completely serious. "Just before it happened, I heard a voice…" What the hell was going on? How much had Nancy missed?

"I'm sorry, I'm completely out of the loop." Nancy says,

stepping closer.

"There are voices in my head, I can't sleep because I'm having insane dreams, I can't even look at my little brother…" Jonathan's voice is tinged with distress, his hands coming up to drag through his hair anxiously. "I feel sick all the time and I didn't want to tell anyone, because I don't…" He sighs and ducks his head again. "I don't want it to be all in my head." He mutters.

"Jesus, man." Steve reaches out, and at first it looks like a simple pat on the shoulder before he grips Jonathan's shirt and tugs the smaller boy into his arms. It's a shock to Nancy, like a bucket of cold water over her head. She realizes then how much she had been missing, how she had been using her studies to distract herself from what was going on. She still had nightmares, her anxiety was at an all-time high, but she couldn't hide from this. Just seeing where it had gotten Jonathan made her feel sick, watching him hesitate just a moment before he wraps his arms around the small of Steve's back and squeezes gently. He looked vulnerable and he sounded so scared, and the idea of him keeping it all inside for so long made her sad.

Nancy never expected Steve and Jonathan to get along, not entirely; they were both so damn stubborn. Not to mention they both thought so little of each other from the start, Jonathan saw Steve as a stuck up jerk and Steve saw Jonathan as some edgy loser. But Nancy had stuck her head in the sand and in doing so probably pushed them towards each other, creating some sort of partnership. She had noticed Steve's insistency in getting to know Jonathan, but she didn't realize he had gotten through to the boy.

"I don't want to be crazy," Jonathan mutters, chin on Steve's shoulder and eyes screwed shut. Nancy reaches out and rests a hand on the back of his neck comfortingly, one of his arms

readjusts higher on Steve's back and the other reaches out towards Nancy. She takes it and he gives it a tight squeeze, she stares down at their hands and realizes how odd of a trio they were.

"You aren't," Nancy assures, stepping a little closer. "I have guilty knowledge." She admits, Steve turns his head and his nose brushes Jonathan's cheekbone before they release each other and step back a little. Jonathan looks down at his hand in Nancy's and releases her with an awkward clearing of his throat. She can't really tell in the red light but she's pretty sure he's blushing again.

"Mike's secret?" Steve inquires, she nods.

"Mike has a secret?" Jonathan asks, confused as he looks between the two of them. Steve looks even guiltier than Nancy feels, and she is certain she made the right decision not informing him. He would have told Jonathan in a second. He couldn't keep secrets from Nancy and she knows it was the same when it came to Jonathan, without a doubt.

"Mike heard Eleven on his radio last week," Nancy confesses, earning wide eyed looks from the other two. Steve steps closer to Nancy, eager to hear more, but Jonathan steps back. His shoulders hunched a little and hands fidgeting with the hem of his sweater.

"Will never…" He shakes his head, sounding hurt. "He never told me, does he know? Are they sure it was Eleven?" He asks, she leans back against the wall and nods.

“They’re positive, and just yesterday…” She allows her voice to trail off for a moment, unsure about how this would come off. “Apparently Will is connected to Eleven, from when she went in the sensory deprivation tank.” She explains quietly, Jonathan’s tense and his eyes are wide with worry. With dawning realization Nancy understands Will being hesitant in informing him. If Jonathan was really acting different then Will was scared it would bring his brother crumbling down all together. She decides in that moment not to inform them about how Eleven had mentioned Jonathan by name, there were too many questions surrounding that situation. She didn’t want any hysteria over nothing.

“Will contacted her somehow, and she said something was after them…” Jonathan steps back a little further, and Steve follows suit, eyes looking to his friend in concern. The smaller boy turns on his heel and runs a hand over the back of his neck, remaining quiet. “She’s in the Upside Down, they think.” Nancy says hesitantly.

“Well then we’re just going to have to save her,” Steve says, Jonathan’s head turns a little to look at him, eyes wary. “Right?” Steve urges, and Jonathan nods slowly. His posture straightens a little with confidence, and he steps back over to Steve, brushing their shoulders together.

“We find her and we find out whatever’s after the boys.” Jonathan agrees quietly, and then the two look to Nancy for her confirmation, her approval.

“I’m in.” She says with a nod, the boys smile.

“We’re like badass monster hunters, we should get matching jackets.” Steve says with a grin, Nancy gives him a look and

seeks Jonathan's companionship in a glance, but Jonathan laughs, actually laughs at Steve's dumb outburst.

"You're so weird," He scoffs; Steve shoves him far too gently and rolls his eyes.

"I didn't say we have to, it was just an idea!" He grumbles, crossing his arms. "You're both buzzkills." He says, sticking his tongue out. Jonathan rolls his eyes in response and pushes him with the same gentle rapport Steve had taken with him.

"All right, we'll meet up after school and talk to the boys. Once we get the facts straight, we can run from that." Nancy explains, Steve and Jonathan nod their agreement without protest. When they leave the dark room together, the people in the halls stare, and Nancy can't find the will to care.

She watches Jonathan hunch up self-consciously; Steve smacks him on the back reassuringly and wraps an arm around his shoulders before Nancy slips under his other arm. Steve smiles at her, obviously pleased at the situation. But Nancy's mind is whirring with thoughts about everything going on, about the boys, Eleven, Jonathan. Something bad was coming, she could feel it.

3. The Trustworthy Ones

Notes for the Chapter:

> (Oh my god, I'm sorry!! I know this took FOREVER to post but you guys gotta bear with me. School is tough and inspiration comes and goes. Anyways, I really hope you enjoy this new chapter, I'm going to try and keep updating once a month so we'll just see... Happy reading!)

The news is all around school by first period, swept up in a tangle of rumors and ideas that are all pretty much lies. Will had woken up this morning to find out that Troy Matthews was dead, and he wasn't sure how to feel.

Sure Troy had been tormenting him and his friends for years, he shoved them around and called them all names, essentially hated their guts. Sometimes Will had wished that he would get expelled or move away, maybe get his ass kicked a little, but he never wanted the guy to die, he wasn't that cruel.

Will had woken up like usual, Jonathan rapping on his door and telling him it was time to get up. He had gotten to the table and waited for Jonathan to finish with breakfast, and like he had been for the past few months his older brother was completely quiet. And yet something seemed off about him, he kept his back turned and his head down as he worked. Joyce had come in and taken the time to kiss each of them on the head as they sat down to eat. After a moment of silence, she told Will what had happened, and that Troy was dead.

Jonathan had kept his eyes on his plate, unable to even look up and meet Will's eyes. He just kept right on with his breakfast

as if nothing was happening, and Will listened in shock as he was told about how Jonathan had been the one to find the body. Joyce had hesitated over telling him, and kept glancing over at Jonathan, who hadn't even flinched.

He had found the body, had been out in the middle of the night for some reason. His mother didn't mention why, but she probably knew and didn't want to tell Will. Whatever he had been up to wasn't good, and Will wanted to know more than anything. But he knew Jonathan would never tell him, not now, not after everything had been so damn screwed up.

By the time Will had gotten to school the entire building was buzzing with gossip, about how Jonathan had lost his mind after his brother went missing and decided to take Troy out for fear of losing him again. All of these scary ideas of his brother flooded the halls, earning Will and his friends quite the stares, but with a supposed murderer at their backs nobody would touch them.

Of course it was a preposterous idea; the four of them knew that. Jonathan was a bit sullen and behaved rather oddly, he might have kept to himself but he was no killer. Mr. Clarke doesn't mention it to them; they spend recess in the AC room and are uncharacteristically quiet. Troy wasn't their only bully, there were quite a few of them, but he was the worst.

Will couldn't really feel bad about his death; all he could think of was being shoved into lockers and called a fairy and a fag. One time Troy had chased him all the way home on their bikes, he'd thrown a rock and hit Will in the back of the head. Will had flipped over his handlebars and ate dirt; Troy had laughed and kicked up dirt on him before riding away. Will had despised him, but even though he was a dick, he didn't deserve to be so brutally killed.

School without him would seem odd, better in a way, but also empty. There was no reason to be happy, all of them knew that, if anything they felt guilt for any sort of relief or happiness they got from the news of his passing. A boy was dead, it didn't matter who he was.

"At least it was Troy." Dustin says after a while, sitting back in his chair with his legs up on the table while he eats a Hostess cupcake. He doesn't look happy, but he doesn't look much broken up about it. Mike shoots him a glare and the curly-headed boy shrugs. "I'm just saying what we're all thinking, and you know it. We didn't kill him, but he's dead now, and that's not on our heads. He was a jerk to us but we don't have to feel bad for not feeling bad about it. We have other problems to worry about." They all simultaneously look to the door, silently worried about someone eavesdropping.

"Maybe we should put it off for today." Lucas suggests with hesitancy, picking at an imperfection in the metal table with his pencil, the worksheet he had next to him long forgotten. Mike shakes his head and leans away from the radio, standing up.

"No, Dustin's right. We have to think about Eleven." He moves around the table and crosses his arms. "I told Nancy about everything, she's smart and she'll help us." He explains, walking over to the dry erase board on the wall and picking up a marker with a sigh.

"Wait, is she gonna tell Jonathan?" Will asks nervously, Mike uncaps the marker and frowns down at the black tip.

“Probably.” He admits, Will looks down at the table in thought. Part of him feels like he should have told Jonathan first, but another part of him knows he couldn’t talk to Jonathan about anything anymore with confidence. It was better that Nancy would tell him, no matter how much anxiety the idea gave him.

“What does Nancy know about this stuff anyway?” Dustin demands smartly, Mike rolls his eyes.

“She knows a lot of stuff, and if she doesn’t know then she can find out.” He promises.

“But she’ll tell the Chief! He’ll never let us do anything!” Lucas objects, Dustin makes a gesture and a noise that offers agreement to his statement.

“They can’t do anything without Will; he’s the only new evidence to the case.” Mike tells them simply, everyone looks to the mentioned boy, who glances away anxiously.

“I guess.” Dustin murmurs, stuffing the rest of his cupcake into his mouth and wiping off his hands on his shirt.

“Well I know, so shut up and listen.” Mike snaps, turning to the dry erase board and drawing a line across the board. He draws four stick figures above it, and one below it, then puts the black marker down and picks up a red one. He erases a piece of the line and draws a red tube from one figure on top to the one on the bottom. “This is us, and this is Eleven.” He informs them, before tapping on the tube connected between the two figures. “This is the

connection between you and El." He tells Will, who nods.

"So if El can create a connection between herself and Will, then maybe she can open a portal." Lucas offers, Mike shakes his head and observes his drawing.

"It drains her, remember? When she disappeared, she was already weak. Maybe she can't do it without enough energy." He guesses, they all stare at him as he paces back and forth. "But maybe we can." He smirks a little, unnerving Will in the slightest.

"But what about the Demogorgon?" Will questions hesitantly, Mike turns around and purses his lips. "We could let it back into our world, Mike! El got caught in the Upside Down saving you from that thing, and we're gonna risk bringing it back? Not to mention the different monster she says is after us!" He feels his voice growing a little hysterical so he clamps his mouth shut, standing and storming over to the board. He draws a large shaded figure standing next to Eleven's figure under the line to make his point.

"Will is right, this is risky. Maybe we should let Nancy tell the Chief and have the adults handle it." Lucas says with a shake of his head, Will glances to Dustin, who rolls his eyes.

"You're both being pussies; don't you have any sense of adventure?" The boy demands with his usual lisp, and then flails a little as he pushes his chair too far back and loses his balance. The other three flinch in sympathy as he falls back and the chair hits the floor with a clatter of a noise. Dustin groans and pushes himself up onto his knees, grabbing the table. "Besides, Eleven went out of her way to protect us. We can't just abandon her." He continues, earning silence from the others in return as he pulls himself to his feet and

rights his chair to sit down in it once more.

Mike turns sullen eyes to Will, pleading with him. Guilt rolls through his stomach in nauseating waves, and he sighs through his nose and slinks back to his chair, dropping down into it and propping his head up on his hand.

“Please, Will? You don’t have to help us find her, but she didn’t have to help us find you, and she did.” He murmurs, Will sighs. Dustin and Mike were right; they were pussyfooting around the inevitable. The only new evidence to this entire thing that was a tangible lead was Will himself, without him, they had nothing to go on. They needed to find Eleven and get her out, they just needed to figure out how to find her first.

“How did you find me?” He asks quietly.

“Compasses,” Dustin tells him with a grin. “It was my idea.”

Of course it was.

“All right, show me.” He relents.

-

Nancy shuffles her book about in her locker, feeling

anxious and a little pit of guilt that had been gnawing at her building in the pit of her stomach. She had no idea how they were going to get to Eleven, no idea how they were going to solve this themselves. But what was eating away at her the most was that she had let Steve and Jonathan slip away from her without a fight.

"I guess I've been kind of busy lately," She tells Steve hesitantly, glancing over at him. He's leaned up against the locker, staring at the front doors as if he might be able to teleport himself outside. They were supposed to meet Jonathan outside in just a few minutes, figure out a plan that Nancy hadn't even started to formulate. She can't think past the idea of neglecting Steve so much that he had started going to Jonathan instead. "But since when have you and Jonathan been so close?"

She doesn't really mean to sound jealous or accusing, but the expression on Steve's face suggests he interpreted it that way. His eyebrows scrunch down and together, confusion and a little bit of suspicion in his dark eyes. In that moment, Nancy loved him, but she also realized that she had lost him somewhere along the way and the same could be said for him about her. It wasn't that she didn't care about him all the time; it was that the excitement of breaking the rules and having someone so carefree and wild love her was fading.

Nancy hadn't expected to get married to her high school sweetheart; Steve was just her first fling, her first real boyfriend. She didn't expect to fall in love with him, but after it had happened she wasn't quite sure what to do about it. Steve was sweet and funny and even though he was a bit of a dick, he cared more than he let on. For some reason though, he just wasn't Nancy's speed. What she really didn't see coming was falling out of love with him without a big reason, they had their little tiffs the year before but no grudges were ever held. And yet, looking in his eyes, she didn't feel the same ache of love she had months before. In fact, *his* eyes were distant, as if he were thinking of something else. More importantly though, was that

he was thinking of *someone* else, even if he hadn't realized it himself.

"Well I thought you wanted us to get along." Steve snaps her out of her thoughts by breaking the pause of silence, seeming puzzled and worried. "That's what you wanted, right?" He asks, shifting his shoulder off of one of the lockers to stand up straight, eyes heartfelt and oh so revealing.

"Of course, I just didn't expect either of you to listen." She chuckles, turning away and moving towards the door. Steve comes up beside her, arm wrapping around her shoulders easily.

"I'm full of surprises, Nancy Wheeler." He teases with a smirk. A sort of solemn quiet falls over them then, as if they were both remembering the circumstances of the situation. Jonathan had found a body, some monster had killed a boy, and their little siblings were trying to contact their missing friend in the hellish dimension in which it came from.

"I'm glad." Nancy says quietly, and Steve nods as he holds the door open for her. They head out towards the parking lot, and Nancy feels a pit of worry begin to form when she spots a couple of boys loitering near Jonathan's car. Four boys to be exact, and this would include Tommy H. and Tammy's boyfriend Chad.

"What's up, guys?" Steve asks warily as they approach the car, he often acted civil towards the other boys despite the fact that they all treated him like they'd never even been friends with him in the first place. The boys cast slightly bored eyes towards the both of them, the other two she didn't quite know the names of, but they were football players as far as she could tell from the varsity jackets.

“Waiting for Byers, man. We noticed you’ve been awful friendly with him lately, Harrington.” Chad says with curiosity lacing his voice. “I didn’t know you were a queer.” He snickers, looking to his friends who jeer in approval of his joke; Steve scowls and crosses his arms.

“What do you want with Jonathan?” He questions, squaring his shoulders and putting on his toughest voice. The thing with Steve Harrington was that he’s only threatening because of social status and wit. The only reason Steve’s smart mouth was untouchable for so long was because his best friend was Tommy, who was a rather large part of the wrestling team. After Jonathan and Steve fought, his reputation of being a tough asshole had gone down the toilet. Nancy wondered if Steve knew just how little standing he had against these guys.

“What do you think we want him for, numb nuts? He killed Kimmy’s little brother, and Richie wants to make it up to his girl.” He nods his head to another one of the boys, who’s leaned up against the trunk of Jonathan’s car casually.

“She’s real upset; I thought maybe this might cheer her up.” Richie smiles viciously, picking at his nails without a care in the world. “Serves him right, people like him shouldn’t be around these parts. Him and his little fag of a brother,” The boy snorts, Steve’s hands clench into fists.

“Steve, don’t.” Nancy warns quietly, her own blood beginning to boil at the offhanded comments. Steve barely glances back at her before Tommy laughs and knocks Richie’s shoulder with a fist.

“Tell me about it, what a couple of fairies. See their dad wasn’t around, so their mama coddled him queer. Poor Will, with the only man in the house bein’ a faggot, wasn’t much of a chance for him at all.” Tommy grins, and Steve steps forward menacingly.

“Take it back.” He demands quietly, voice a false calm with a wave of rage building behind it. The boys laugh and thump at each other in amusement, Tommy steps forward.

“What was that, Stevie? You got something to say to me?” He pushes right into Steve’s space, noses almost touching and breaths mingling. Steve doesn’t cower away, eyes a dead glare into Tommy’s, he shakes his head slowly and scoffs.

“Why was I ever friends with you?” He mutters, sucking on his teeth quietly. When Steve goes to turn away, reminding himself that violence was not very good to commit on school property, he’s yanked backwards. His back is forced against Jonathan’s car, the frame digging into his shoulders and Tommy’s hand tight around his collar.

“Because I’m the only one that would protect your ass, you spineless piece of shit.” He growls, and Nancy steps forward curtly. She snatches a tight hold on Tommy’s jacket and turns him; her fist meets his jaw in a rough movement. The young man falls back against the car in shock, letting go of Steve in the process. Richie snags the Harrington boy by his jacket so he can’t get away, but Steve seems a little too in awe of Nancy’s rather unpredictable move to try and escape.

“Jesus!” Tommy exclaims as Chad yanks Nancy off her feet by her waist, she struggles and kicks her legs. “You stupid bitch! Why can’t you just keep to yourself?” Tommy snarls, brushing his fingers over the pink mark on his cheek. “You lose that geeky chick and you just decide trail these losers around?” He laughs; Nancy digs her fingernails into Chad’s wrist and is promptly released.

“Leave her alone!” Steve can barely move before Richie kicks a leg into the back of his knee and sends him toppling to the ground. The fourth unknown boy kicks the young man in the side just to keep him down, Steve groans and rolls over onto his side. Tommy grabs Nancy by the wrist before she can step back, yanking her close.

It’s almost as if time slows, she’s staring into Tommy’s dark eyes, fearless against an impossibly stronger threat. She wouldn’t leave Steve, boyfriend or no, she cared about him. She just needed a plan, why couldn’t she think of anything? Tommy’s hand is tight around her thin wrist, just on the edge of painful. Steve is being pulled to his feet and-

“Tommy, watch it!” Richie is barely able to shout before a body collides into Tommy’s and rips the boy away from Nancy as they collapse to the ground together. The shock of it knocks the breath out of her, and she stands gaping as Jonathan Byers begins to beat Tommy mercilessly. They tumble and roll together, getting in a few hits each. After it begins to seem like the eldest Byers is getting in one too many hits, Chad joins in and yanks Jonathan off of Tommy and throws him like a ragdoll. He rolls along the pavement in a painful looking jarring motion, slowing to a stop with a breathless groan.

Before Chad can approach any further, Steve rushes between them and clocks him right in the face, knocking him to the

concrete roughly. He takes hold of Nancy's wrist and pulls her over to Jonathan; he grabs a fistful of the boy's denim jacket and lifts him to his feet before they're all racing across the parking lot towards Steve's car. Steve's hands are firm in place, one on Nancy's wrist and the other gripped in the shoulder of Jonathan's jacket. Nancy can hear some, if not all, of the boys at their heels. They scramble into the car and Steve locks the doors just after Jonathan slams the back door.

"Let's go!" Nancy demands as Steve fusses with the keys before hurriedly pushing one into the ignition. The engine revs to life just as Chad reaches the window and they peel out of the parking lot with a screech of wheels.

"Jesus Christ," Steve pants as he rights himself on the road, hands shaky on the wheel. He runs a hand through his now messy hair, feeling all out of sorts for so many reasons. He turns his eyes to Nancy for a quick second, finding her leaning her elbow on the car door with her forehead balanced against her palm. He takes in a deep breath and focuses on the road for a few moments, taking a left turn.

"Everyone okay?" Nancy questions, looking back at Jonathan.

"Wh-Why were you fighting?" Jonathan asks weakly. Steve meets his eyes in the rearview mirror and spots a thin welling of blood from a scratch on his forehead that's slowly beginning to drip into his eyebrow . Steve glances to Nancy nervously; a little afraid to admit what had happened.

"Well," Nancy begins, glancing at Steve with a sort of expression that promises a cover story. Something in the pit of his

stomach forces its way into his throat and his mouth drops open without his permission.

"They were looking for you, and they were talking shit they shouldn't have been talking." He confesses seriously, focusing on the road and adjusting his hands on the wheel. "No big deal," He says casually, dropping his eyes to his pinking and slightly scraped knuckles on his right hand. There's quiet for another minute or so, before Jonathan shifts in the back seat.

"Pull over," He says suddenly; Steve hesitates, frowning a little.

"But-"

"Pull the fuck over!" Jonathan demands, Steve lurches the car to the curb and Jonathan's out onto the pavement not a second later, storming back in the direction of the school. Steve gets out of the car, stepping onto the sidewalk and waving his hands about.

"What the hell, Byers? Where are you going?" He shouts at the boy's retreating back.

"I don't need you to fight for me Steve, especially when it just drags me into protecting you!" Jonathan calls back at him, barely turning his head.

"We're friends! I was trying to help; you don't have to

protect me!" His voice lowers an octave as Jonathan spins around and comes stomping back up to him. The blood is drying on his forehead, and there's a reddish purple mark on his cheekbone that would probably swell and bruise. "I'm not just gonna stand there as you get the shit knocked out of you, man, they could have really hurt you." He defends quietly, Jonathan shakes his head with his eyes alight with anger.

"Like they haven't before?" He snaps with hands at his sides in frustrated fists. "You never looked twice at me before all of this; all of your little buddies have taken a swing at me one time or another. Where was big hero Steve then?" He demands.

"I was a dick, I know, haven't we discussed this before?" Steve rubs the back of his neck, smiling awkwardly and shuffling his feet. "Why are you mad at me?" He can't help the insecurity dripping into his voice, feeling more vulnerable than ever.

"Guys, just stop." Nancy tries to speak over them, attempting to gain their attention.

"Because you treated me like dirt until your girlfriend started hanging around me!" Jonathan explodes, stepping farther into Steve's space and getting in his face just as Tommy had. Nancy pushes between them, trying to keep them from getting into it.

"Stop it!" She commands.

"I thought you said this wasn't about Nancy!" Steve scoffs; Jonathan's face begins to turn even redder in anger.

“It’s not about Nancy; it’s about the fact that you never gave a fuck about me until just recently.” He explains with his voice low and serious. “I’m not one to hold grudges, but maybe I’d just like to know why you suddenly think I’m worth getting your ass kicked over.” He crosses his arms, staring at the taller boy expectantly.

“Because I met you?” Steve offers after a moment of gaping, voice hesitant. “B-Because I wanted to know what the big deal was with Jonathan Byers, I wanted to know what Nancy saw…” His voice lowers as his cheeks redden, embarrassed at his sudden admission.

“And?” Jonathan quirks an eyebrow at him and his expression demands him to continue elaborating.

“You’re brutally honest, more than a bit of a smart ass, and you’re short as hell.” Steve smirks a little when Jonathan chuckles wryly, the tension from the situation diffusing in the slightest. “But you’re also kind of funny; your music taste isn’t awful.” He shrugs; Jonathan rolls his eyes but still seems amused. “You’re not as bad as I originally thought, okay? Stop overanalyzing this, all right?”

“That’s harder than you think,” Jonathan murmurs, looking a little more than guilty. Nancy knew Jonathan had many problems with trust, he always thought someone had an ulterior motive. He was always being used, being stepped on, being mistreated. After years of it, the amount of walls he had built up were reinforced so much that even when he wanted to trust someone his doubts and insecurities got in the way. Steve was similar in those respects; he used his humor as a crutch, a barrier. Nancy supposed she was sort of right when she had stated once that they had more in

common than they thought.

"Well you can trust us, man… We fought a monster together." Steve smiles brightly, and Jonathan rolls his eyes once more in exasperated amusement. "Get in the car." He nods his head towards the vehicle, Jonathan shifts, unsure.

"I should go get my car," He says quietly, Steve shakes his head.

"That's dangerous and you know it, don't be an idiot, Byers. Those assholes could hang around for hours." He waves a hand, glancing back at Nancy.

"I'll let you ride shotgun." She adds humorously, Jonathan huffs a soft laugh and nods.

"You're driving me to get my car later." He points a finger at Steve, who holds his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"Fine by me." He agrees, and Jonathan takes a step as if to move to the other side of the car. He pauses, as if silently debating something, before shaking his head a bit and stepping around to get in the passenger seat. Steve and Nancy share a glance before climbing into the car as well, Steve starts up the car once more and they're off towards the Byers residence.

-

Jonathan felt raw and messed up, more so than recently, which he didn't think was possible. He always felt conflicted about hanging out with Steve, and this was exactly why. The feelings he had around him were far more than he expected, he could barely stand to breathe the same air as the guy a year ago.

He had gone to the photography room to clean up before school ended, and after putting his satchel in his locker he'd come outside to see a gathering of people at his car. At first he was going to retreat, thinking that some of the jocks had wanted to corner him (it wouldn't be the first time)… But then he'd seen two familiar figures, one pushed up against a car. He'd witnessed the punch, in awe and shock of Nancy. But then he'd seen Steve get knocked over, kicked without mercy, and his body practically shook with fury as he took off towards them.

As a child Jonathan had never been violent, he'd been rather docile until the fight the year before with Steve. He'd been painfully shy, awkward, a fucked up puzzle piece that didn't fit in anywhere. He'd been covered in spitballs, tripped, shoved, had trash thrown at him. His mother and brother didn't know, he never told them, he didn't want anybody to know of his cowardice. But nobody pokes fun at his family, and nobody messes with the people he cares about.

He'd run right into Tommy just to get him away from Nancy, the boy was strong but Jonathan had the benefit of pure rage on his side. If there was one thing Jonathan was grateful for from his father in that moment, it was the anger that seemed to rip through his body like a rushing river. It always scared him, how angry he could get, a potential to become something more. But he never let it get out of hand, always afraid of being a bully, afraid of becoming his father.

But in that moment he was doing something good, he was protecting people he loved, people he cared about. He didn't care about the damage done to him; he couldn't bear the thought of seeing a scratch on Nancy or a mark on Steve. That was what scared him the most, how invested he had become in those two.

The adrenaline was fading fast by the time he'd gotten back into the car a second time, now seated in the passenger seat. His jaw was aching a little, and there was a pulse of pain in his head with every beat of his heart. All he could think about was how awful he felt now, how stupid of a move it was to act so recklessly. Of course Tommy deserved it, just like Steve had the year before, but that didn't mean his anxiety couldn't consume him for it.

Jonathan sinks lower in his seat, the silence of the car deafening as they drive towards his house. He watches the trees pass in a dizzying blur, shutting his eyes just to calm the whirlwind of his mind. A voice in the back of his head, not the girl from before, but one he'd had from a young age. It often sounded like his father, berating him for his decisions, for his feelings.

He opens his eyes and glances over at Steve, who seems to immediately notice the attention and turns his head briefly to offer him a dazzling grin. Jonathan feels his stomach churn sickly and offers a weak smile in return, that voice speaking up a little louder.

" It's one thing to act like a fag; it's another to actually be one."

Jonathan shakes his head and glares out the window, steadily ignoring his thoughts. If he could just tune it all out, make it

go away… He tightens a hand in his soft sweater, pinching the fabric between two fingers and massaging it gently. He thinks of whiskey and anything mind numbing enough to make it all stop, and his thoughts turn into his mother's voice.

" You're not alone."

Oh mom, he thinks to himself*, but I really am this time.*

-

Will uses his key to open the front door when they get to the house, Jonathan's car wasn't home yet and he probably wouldn't be home for a few hours. He liked to stay after school in the dark room and mess around with his photos and whatnot, and when he wasn't doing that he was working. It seemed like at first when Will had originally gotten back home, he'd never have time alone away from his family. They had smothered him for weeks, months after, but then it faded.

His mother had to go back to work, Jonathan did too, but the extra time off stopped. Jonathan went from being a part time presence to a rare sight, and it upset Will to think that it could have been because of him. He knew he had been acting a little different since coming back from the Upside Down, but his brother never cared about how odd he was and he'd always returned the kindness.

Then again, maybe it was less of the way Will was acting and more of Jonathan coping with it all. After all, he was the one with the awful coping mechanisms in the family. Will had witnessed one bad habit after another from his brother, from chewing on his shirt collar when he was in junior high to the more recent chewing his fingernails until his fingers bled. He was anxious and awkward, a

lot like Will, who wasn't without quirks of his own.

Still thinking about Jonathan, he glances to the liquor cabinet as he passes. He can remember a large bottle of whiskey seated just inside the glass case on the top shelf. There's a simple square in the dust of the cabinet where it once was, and Will connects the pieces with his mind. So that's what Jonathan was doing when he found Troy's body, he realizes sullenly as he steps down the hall.

He walks into his room and observes everything for a moment before stepping inside, knowing that his friends would give him the courtesy of reassuring himself. He always had to make sure things were neat, and he always had to make sure there was light from something. He hated the dark even more than he used to, it reminded him of the trauma he'd experienced months before. He closes an open dresser drawer, opens his curtains to let in the light, and sinks down onto the bed. Mike crawls onto the bed next to him and Dustin flings himself down to sprawl out, his body against their backs where they sat at the edge of the mattress. Lucas makes his way around the bed, sitting down in front of them quietly.

"What if there's not a portal this time?" Will questions, rubbing his hands together anxiously. They had decided to enlist Jonathan's help for tonight, as a cover and protection to search for the gate. Will thought that maybe if he was honest with Jonathan about this, he might be less angry and more trusting in their search for Eleven. He had to find some way to fix his relationship with Jonathan, and perhaps reaching out and opening up could be a good start.

"Then we'll find another way, but we have to try." Mike says, sure of himself. He wraps an arm around Will's shoulders and

gives him a light squeeze for comfort. “With Jonathan helping us we can cover more ground, and we can get Nancy to help too if we hit a dead end.” He explains, Will nods, a little reassured. Jonathan never had the heart to stay angry with Will; he’d be relieved that they came to him with this instead of running off into the forest on their own.

“We should pack some things, right?” He asks, then quickly elaborating. “For tonight.” Mike glances back at Dustin, who’s throwing his hat up in the air and catching it in an attempt to busy his fidgeting. He pauses in his movements to look at Mike, shrugging a little and then adding a nod after he takes a moment to think. Mike swivels his head around, finding Lucas already nodding his head.

“Yeah, we should pack some things…” He agrees quietly, patting Will on the back. “Do you want us to stay to help explain everything to Jonathan?” He questions, Will nods.

“Is he working today?” Lucas asks hesitantly, Will frowns and shakes his head.

“No, I don’t think so. He usually doesn’t work on Sundays and Mondays, unless he takes extra shifts.” He explains with a shrug, they all fall into another lapse of quiet. Lucas takes a small metal wind up robot from Will’s bedside table and moves its parts quietly. Many things were rushing through the boys’ heads, from the implications of what they were getting into to the idea of Eleven being trapped in the Upside Down. Will felt sick at the thought of being trapped in that awful place for so long, his own experience had been nothing short of hell, and he never really did tell anyone about it.

He wanted to forget and move on, but they couldn't move on without everyone safe. No, he would just have to suck it up and learn to be brave like everyone else. If his friends could soldier through this, so could he, for Eleven.

Their bout of silence is interrupted by the sound of the front door opening, followed by not only Jonathan's voice but others accompanying it. The boys glance at one another in uneasy confusion, wary of the conversation about to take place and puzzled by Jonathan having guests.

"Will, are you home?" Jonathan calls; Will stands up and walks out to meet his brother, his friends trailing behind him.

He stops in the doorway at the sight of his brother, a bloody scratch on his forehead and a nasty bruise on his cheek. It had been quite a while since Jonathan had come home bruised and battered, the kids practically assaulted him on the daily in junior high, but they got bored eventually… Or so Will thought.

"Jesus, what happened to your face?" Dustin blurts first, and there's a scoff that Will quickly realizes is Steve sitting on the couch a few feet away. Jonathan ducks his head a little, giving a little side glance in Steve's direction which lingers just a bit too long before Nancy pushes through the group of boys to reach Jonathan. She must have been in the kitchen, Will realizes quickly.

The girl has a rag in her hand and sets to gently scrubbing the dried blood from Jonathan's eyebrow, Steve shifts in his seat as he turns his gaze from the pair towards the boys.

“So, see any good monsters lately?” He asks with a small smirk and a raise of his eyebrow.

“Wh-What?” Mike murmurs, the group of boys shuffling awkwardly.

“When were you planning on telling me about contacting Eleven?” Jonathan pushes Nancy’s hand away and steps past her, giving Will a stern look that he often mentally dubbed his ‘dad look’. Jonathan didn’t often scold him; he was rather caring and sympathetic towards Will’s occasional follies. But when he put himself in danger or did something that could get him in trouble, well, he drew the line. Lonnie never had much of a dad look like Jonathan, he had more of a pissed off look than anything else.

“Soon! Today, actually! We want your help looking for the portal.” Will explains with a nod of his head, looking to his friends with a pleading expression to urge them into speaking up on his behalf.

“Portal.” Jonathan deadpans, his eyebrow quirks and he winces a little as if remembering the cut on his forehead. Will watches the cut well with blood once more, and he wonders who did it to him. A number of people who had teased Jonathan over the years come to mind, and he can’t quite pinpoint one single person.

“The gate, we went looking for it last time. The one your mom and Hopper went through.” Lucas elaborates easily, the other boys nod in agreement.

“I’m sorry, have you lost your mind?” Jonathan demands with an unbelieving look as he crosses his arms, Steve laughs quietly and Nancy settles herself at Jonathan’s side. They look like an immovable force together, and Steve who is acting so casual seems to be admiring the both of them.

“We need to find her! We’re her only hope!” Mike defends; Nancy shakes her head and laughs in cynical exasperation.

“That’s ridiculous; you don’t need to get involved with this.” Nancy tells them with a wave of her hand.

“Nancy’s right, guys. You’re too young to be involved in interdimensional rescue missions.” Steve jokes with a grin, holding his hands up in silent surrender when Nancy and Jonathan give him matching glares. “Got it, Steve stays quiet.” He promises with a small smile, acting as if he’s dragging a zipper across his mouth and locking it before throwing the key away.

“Who’s going to handle it, then?” Lucas asks warily, crossing his arms. The other boys follow his lead, imitating the gesture and giving the elder teens a group of raised eyebrows.

“Us, the adults, and not you.” Jonathan lists simply with a laugh; Will shakes his head, angry. They couldn’t get anything done without him, how could they contact Eleven without him? “You could have gotten yourself killed messing around with all of this, you know that?”

“We’re asking for your help, can’t you at least be less of a

jerk about it?" Mike snaps with a huff, the others murmur their agreement.

"Besides, who's gonna stop us from doing it anyway? We're the ones with the connection; you have nothing to go on." Dustin says smugly, patting Will on the shoulder to prove his point.

"Your connection is hereby grounded, so how's that?" Jonathan says with a shrug, the boys gasp and offer each other panicked expressions before looking to Will for his reaction.

"You can't ground me, you're not mom!" Will fumes; Jonathan gives a wry smirk and nods his head.

"Watch me, and tonight when I tell mom what you and your little friends have been up to, she'll agree." Will's blood boils, Jonathan was supposed to be on his side! From birth, Jonathan was on his side, always there for him. How could he pull this when Will needed him the most?

"Jonathan's right, Mike. The second mom hears about this you're a dead man." Nancy agrees without argument, turning and walking over to the couch to sit next to Steve. As if she's shared her piece, Steve wraps an arm around her shoulders and barely glances at her before turning his eyes back to Jonathan. He definitely wasn't just gazing in infatuation at Nancy; no this was directed towards the eldest Byers. However, this was the last thing on Will's mind, his eyes barely registering it before refocusing on his older brother.

"That's so not fair! You can't just snitch on us!" Mike

objects towards Nancy, moving to stand in front of the coffee table as he waves his arms about in exaggeration.

"And what makes you think you can handle it anyway?" Will demands, scowling up at his brother. "You're being an asshole and you know it!" He shouts at Jonathan, whose expression twists into one of agitation.

"Watch your mouth, Will. I might not be mom, but we all know who's in charge when she's not here!" He snaps, looking to Dustin and Lucas behind him. "I think your friends should go home, I don't want you meeting up outside of school until this is all over." He waves a hand; Dustin and Lucas begin to inch towards the door awkwardly. Mike and Nancy are bickering in the background, but all Will can hear is the blood in his ears.

"Oh please, you can't tell me what to do when you can't even function sober anymore!" Will screams, and Jonathan flinches as everyone falls quiet at the boy's proclamation. "You think I'm so stupid, don't you? Well I noticed the missing whiskey from the liquor cabinet, and the way you're never home! You're turning into a drunken asshole just like dad, and now you think you can control me like him!"

He knows the second the words are out that he can never take them back, and he really wishes he could. He didn't even know why he said it; he wasn't usually one to speak out of anger. Jonathan was sensitive about their father, more so than Will was, just because of everyone comparing them to one another. Jonathan Alonzo Byers, named after his father, the firstborn that Lonnie had always taken to calling 'Junior' during his younger years until Jonathan protested against it. It was a low blow, a pressure point that Will had just taken advantage of unfairly. Will had known his weak spot and

exploited it without even thinking twice.

Jonathan's eyes are wide and his expression is blank, shoulders tense and body tight like a bow. Like he might snap, and for a moment Will feels like he might get a slap to his face like his father would have done in this situation. But his father never held pain and hurt in his eyes; his father didn't look like he'd been stabbed in the chest when someone spit angry words at him… No that was all Jonathan, and that was what made them so different. He regretted even thinking Jonathan would lay a hand on him, because he never had before, and to expect something like that from him was like spitting in his face.

"Jonathan," Nancy says quietly, and it's like someone hit the play button on the VCR. Jonathan snaps from his stillness and grabs Will by his shirt collar, dragging him down the hall forcefully and towards his room. Will drags his feet, holding onto Jonathan's wrist before he's shoved into his room and the door is slammed behind him. He races up to the door and tugs on the knob, banging his small fists against the hard wood when it refuses to open. The sound of something being shoved against the door echoes against his ears and when he tries the knob, it turns but the door still won't budge out of place.

"Let me out!" He demands.

"You're going to stay in there until mom gets home!" Jonathan calls through the door, and then there are voices from the living room that he can't quite make out. He feels like he just wedged an even bigger gap between himself and his brother, tore open a wound that only he knew about. He had betrayed Jonathan; a silent oath had been broken.

He steps back from the door and sinks down onto his bed, dropping his face into his hands as tears well into his eyes. God, what was wrong with him?

-

Jonathan could never describe the pain that seared into him at his little brother's angry words, proclaiming him to be no better than their drunk and abusive father. Of course Lonnie wasn't only abusive when he was drunk; in fact, he was less likely to hurt them when he was wasted… But that was beside the point; Will was supposed to have his back always. Then again, Jonathan was supposed to have his as well.

He probably deserved to be knocked down a peg, have some sense slapped into him. But he allows his petty anger to take ahold of him and he hauls Will to his room and slams the door shut behind him. He holds the door shut until Will stops trying to open it, before heading into his room and grabbing a chair. He slants it against the doorknob, effectively locking the boy in his room.

He felt a little like a child doing something like this, or perhaps an on edge parent. But he'd never lay a hand on Will and this was the closest thing to punishment he could think of. He'd never really had to punish Will before, his mother hadn't either. Jonathan and Will were good kids; they didn't do things they weren't supposed to. Jonathan can only remember his father punishing them unfairly, and he feels a little sick to think that he might have just done something to that effect.

When he steps back out into the living room, Nancy is standing next

to the other three boys; Steve has yet to move from his spot on the couch. He looks a little more anxious now, observing Jonathan with cautious eyes like the rest of them. Earlier he had seemed a little amused at the whole situation, even if Nancy and Jonathan hadn't. He didn't have a younger sibling; he didn't understand the fear of them getting hurt by doing something stupid.

"Everyone out, the show's over." He points to the door, anger and embarrassment crashing through him and showing through the dark red heat on his cheeks. He hadn't told anyone except Hopper about his drinking, his mother of course knew because Hopper knew, but nobody else. At least, he thought so, but of course as always Will is ever observant.

"Jonny," Steve looks hurt, or at least he looked like he always did when he thought Jonathan was keeping something from him. But perhaps it's justified in this moment, considering how Nancy's expression matches Steve's. He couldn't always understand a person's facial expressions and what exactly they meant with how fast they changed, that's why he always liked photography. Jonathan could take time to observe someone's stance, their face; it was like an equation that took time to solve. He wished he hadn't left his camera in his locker, because it would come in handy right now.

"Boys, go home." Nancy says suddenly, her expression shifting into one that reminded him of the night they decided to fight the Demogorgon. Determination, his brain slowly recalls, tired and lagging behind.

"But Will-" Mike begins to object, mouth snapping shut when Nancy turns sharp blue eyes on him in warning. "Okay, okay." Mike storms out, obviously displeased, Dustin and Lucas following behind with lingering looks back at the teenagers before the door shuts on their way out. Steve stands up, stepping up behind Nancy and hunching over slightly, which still wasn't enough to make them

the same height.

“You should go too,” Jonathan says, with a little less heat this time. He feels like an open wound, raw and exposed and bleeding and he just wants the floor to swallow him up. The mental analogy makes a chill crawl up his spine, the idea of the walls or floors opening up again are quickly a preference that is trashed without a second thought.

“No offense, man. But I’m kinda uneasy about leaving you here by yourself after that outburst.” Steve leans up against the couch, sinking down on to the arm and resting his arms on his thighs as he bends forward. He looks to Nancy, as if seeking back up, and when Jonathan follows his gaze he meets Nancy’s.

“There’s nothing wrong with drinking,” He defends quietly, crossing his arms and glancing away from the smaller girl’s intense glare.

“There’s nothing wrong with drinking unless you’re alone when you’re doing it.” She fires right back without hesitation, not with malice but with sincerity, delivering a point without scorn. Jonathan withers under her stare, ducking his head and staring down at the ratty carpet that was so worn down that holes were beginning to form to show the concrete underneath.

“I don’t need you guys breathing down my neck; I’ve got my mom for that.” He huffs, offering a wry smile that often appeared when he was nervous.

“What about the plan?” Steve asks suddenly, hands stretched out in an expecting gesture.

“Plan’s off, I’m tired, I want to take a shower.” He reaches up and touches the bruise on his cheek, which was warm and already sore. He wants to get into his bed in the dark and sleep the rest of the day away.

“We can wait, not like we have anything else to do.” Steve says, which would be seen as rude from anyone else, but really Steve was just sort of like that. He put himself into other people’s business without a second thought, and he was just so charming that people stepped back and allowed him to. It wasn’t like he was invading people’s privacy, but he just pushed past societal norms, which Jonathan understood on a personal level.

“Steve’s right, we can wait right here.” Nancy assures him before approaching him as if he might be a skittish wild animal and he sort of feels like one at the moment. She places a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it comfortingly and leaning up on her toes to kiss his cheek. “Go on; take care of what you need to.” She gestures at him, and he steps back, peering over at Steve. He doesn’t seem in the least bit bothered by the affection.

“What she said, man.” Steve slips backwards off the arm of the chair, his legs hanging over it as he reclines his upper half onto the cushions of the couch. “We’ll be right here.” He mutters, legs swinging carelessly in a way that would make Jonathan smile if he wasn’t so exhausted.

He trudges back into the hall, unable to look at the chair against Will’s door for longer than a second without shame filling

him to the brim. Jonathan slips into the bathroom and closes the door behind him, thumb tracing over the lock that had been broken for a few years now. He sighs and turns in place, reaching behind the shower curtains to turn on the faucet. Jonathan slips off his shirt, avoiding his reflection as he drops it on the edge of the sink.

He looks down at his palm, where the raised skin reminds him once again of the year before and the way it had not scarred him physically as much as mentally. The air around him starts to get warmer as the water in the shower heats up, and the mirror is beginning to fog. He meets his own tired eyes in the reflection before looking down and bracing his hands on the sink to use one foot and the other to take off his shoes individually.

When he leans over to slip his jeans down to his ankles, he's hit with a sudden wave of nausea. He grabs hold of the sink once more and pulls himself upwards, hoping that righting himself might give him some relief. His eyes meet his reflection's gaze once more, but he spots something dark behind him. There's a flicker of the light in front of him as his mind takes a moment to figure out what's happening.

Dark black glinting eyes, multiple sets of eyes scattered about a greasy and hairy face and a mouth with large dripping fangs. He only sees a glimpse of it before he lets out a shout and tries to spin around to get a look at it, his pants tripping his ankles up before he sails sideways against the shower curtain. There's a rip followed by a distant thud before everything goes black.

-

Steve isn't sure how to handle the idea of Jonathan drinking, and not Steve's kind of partying drinking, the bad kind. The three A.M. can't sleep, can't get these thoughts out of my head drinking. He'd had it at one point or another, but a person like Jonathan did not have an occasional heavy drinking heavy thoughts night. No because it always seemed like Jonathan was thinking too much, that the weight of his thoughts was dragging him further under with every moment.

It scared Steve a little, to think of his best friend drowning under the stress of his own mind. To come unglued at the seams and trying to drink it all away until nothing was left, a horrible thing that he never wanted to happen to Jonathan Byers.

"I'm worried about him," He dares to admit to Nancy, peering up at her as she runs her fingers through his hair distractedly. Jonathan had gone to take a shower, the water had turned on and neither of them had said a word until now. He knew Nancy was trying to think of a way to handle the situation delicately without making Jonathan more uncomfortable or angry with them.

"I know, I don't think-" Nancy's words are cut off by a startled shout, and when Steve sits up there's a loud crash of a noise.

"Jonathan?" He calls, scrambling up from the couch and into the hallway. He can hear Will calling Jonathan's name as well, but he ignores it as he knocks on the bathroom door. The water is still running but there's no response. "Jonny, you okay in there?" He knocks again, and when there's once again no reply Nancy nudges his back.

"Try the knob," She demands, he hesitates only a moment

before twisting the golden knob. It turns and he pushes the door open, steam billowing out from inside as he allows the door to swing the rest of the way open.

The shower is spraying down on Jonathan, who's lying in a heap, tangled partially in the shower curtain with his pants around his ankles. The old Steve would have pointed and laughed, and that part of him sort of wants to find it amusing. However, that humorous part of him is overridden by concern.

"Jonny?" He moves forward and kneels down next to the tub, ignoring Nancy's hand on his shoulder as he quickly shuts off the shower. Jonathan groans quietly and his limbs flail a little from underneath the curtain, so Steve lifts the curtain off of his face. Jonathan seems unharmed, just a little dazed as he blinks rapidly with a small grimace on his face.

"Wha-…" His eyes widen suddenly and he jerks slightly as he looks around in a panic. "Where is it?" He demands, frantic as he scrambles to get himself upright and out of the tub. Steve reaches out and grabs his hands to help him into a sitting position on the edge of the tub.

"Where's what? What happened?" Steve asks, and they all jump when the door swings open again and Will steps inside.

"Jonathan, are you okay?" He asks, scared and worried as he kneels down behind Nancy and Steve. Steve glances over at Nancy in confusion, who seems just as puzzled.

“Did you let him out?” Steve asks, Nancy shakes her head and they both look to Will. “How’d you get out?” He questions, Will frowns.

“The chair wasn’t against the door.” He offers with a slightly unsure expression on his young face.

Steve pushes the confusion to the side and refocuses on Jonathan, who’s looking around the bathroom with anxiety. He seemed to be searching for something, hands clenched into white fists and shivering (perhaps trembling). He was soaking wet, hair in his eyes and pants around his ankles, only clothed in his boxers. Steve couldn’t help but mentally compare him to a wet Chihuahua.

“All right, everyone out. Give the dude some dignity,” He turns and ushers Nancy and Will to their feet and pushes them out of the bathroom. When he looks back to Jonathan, the young man is staring at him with a frustrated frown.

“It had black eyes,” He murmurs, and Steve tips his head to the side.

“Do I have to drive you to the hospital for a concussion?” He reaches around and feels at the back of Jonathan’s head, where there’s only a slight bump. The smaller knocks his hand away roughly, rubbing both his hands over his damp face and pushing his hair back.

“There was something in here, in the mirror. It was black and it had fangs and- and glistening black eyes, it was right behind

me.” Jonathan shakes his head, eyes desolate and Steve hated to admit, defeated. It was as if he knew Steve wouldn’t believe him, as if he thought that he was actually losing his mind.

“Was it big?” Steve questions and Jonathan’s eyes widen significantly.

“One of its eyes was probably the size of my palm.” He whispers, ducking his head a little and rubbing his hands together nervously. “It was right there, it was so real.” He murmurs.

“I’m not saying you’re lying, I know you saw something. But there are three things that could explain this,” Steve crouches down in front of Jonathan, placing a hand on his bare shoulder. “One could be that there was a giant monster in the bathroom with you, and honestly after everything we’ve seen I’d believe it.” He smirks a little when Jonathan’s lips twitch in half-hearted amusement. “Two, all of these nightmares and voices are something freaky like before, and maybe you had a vision of a monster.”

“What’s the third?” Jonathan asks softly, and Steve squeezes his shoulder comfortingly.

“Three is that you haven’t been sleeping well, you’re running on empty and your mind is playing tricks on you. Now I’m not betting on that one, but I’d like to prove it wrong first.” He helps Jonathan to his feet and places his shoe between his legs to pin his jeans to the floor so Jonathan can step out of them. “We get you some water, a nap, we’ll eat something and if you see another monster we can look at the other two options.” He explains.

Steve wraps a towel around Jonathan's shoulders and ruffles his wet hair, dropping an arm around his shoulders and leading him out of the bathroom. He casts a glance over at Will's room, where the door is open and the chair is tipped sideways against the opposite wall. He creates a scenario in which the chair was tipped over from Will's force and knocked away by him opening the door, justifying the lack of noise heard with the idea that he was too focused on Jonathan to hear it.

Jonathan's room is a mess of dirty clothes on the floor and bedsheets strewn halfway off the bed. Steve internally cringes at the sight, his tidy upbringing making his hands itch to clean it all up. Jonathan looks back at him with embarrassment and Steve smiles reassuringly in response.

"I can leave while you get changed, I'm sure you can take it from here." He turns on his heel to step out of the room, swiftly stepping through the clutter on the floor.

"W-Wait," Steve twists his neck around to observe Jonathan, who has his towel bunched up in his tense hands and observing the floor awkwardly. "Could you maybe just turn around? I know it's stupid, but if that thing comes back…" His voice trails off, and Steve can think of a few endings to that sentence. If it came back, Jonathan wanted Steve to see it too. If it came back, Jonathan didn't want to be second guessing his perception of reality. If it came back, he didn't want to be alone in this.

"Yeah, of course." He turns back to face the door and shoves his hands into his pockets, listening to Jonathan rustle around with his clothes. He thinks he might be searching through the piles on the floor, which his mother would absolutely throw a fit over but Steve always secretly wished to do such messy teenager things like

that. Jonathan was his absolute opposite, responsible and yet somehow messy, quiet and thoughtful but firm in his beliefs and words.

"I'd apologize for the mess but it's not the first time you've seen it like this," Jonathan mutters, and Steve hums while observing a chip in the wood of the door frame.

"I'm sure you've got more important things to do than clean your room, Jonny." He offers with a chuckle, Jonathan clears his throat and Steve takes it as his cue to turn around. He's trying to dry his wet hair with the towel from earlier and is now dressed in a pair of dark gray sweatpants and a baggy blue t-shirt that's faded with a few holes worried into it in the hem.

"I am pretty busy with being a drunken asshole," It's an attempt at a joke, but the pain and the self-hatred shine through too brightly for it to be funny. Jonathan looks embarrassed once more, dropping his towel in the middle of the floor and sinking down to sit on his bed.

Steve sighs and heads over to join him, placing himself a little further up the bed and turning to face Jonathan. He crosses his legs and when Jonathan moves to mimic his position he waits for him to get settled to speak.

"Will didn't mean that, I barely know the kid and without a doubt I know he didn't mean it." He promises, and Jonathan shrugs.

“He might not have meant it, but it doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

“Obviously the drinking is new, I’m guessing it’s new, right?” Steve taps Jonathan’s elbow and the younger peers up at him through his bangs, nodding minutely. “Why’d you start drinking?” He asks quietly, Jonathan huffs and peers down at his lap, picking at a loose thread in his shirt. Steve guessed that’s how the other holes had gotten there. “C’mon, if you can’t tell your best friend then who can you tell?” He questions.

“Who said you’re my best friend?” Jonathan glances up for just a fraction of a second, amusement in his eyes and his lips twitched upwards. Steve offers a dramatic gasp, clutching his chest with one hand and leaning back on the other.

“I have to say, you wound me with such harsh words, Byers.” Jonathan snorts quietly and shakes his head, reaching up to tug on his bangs with restless fingers, twisting one of them around a lock of hair.

“Are you over it?” Jonathan inquires suddenly, not looking up, and Steve frowns.

“Over what?” He asks.

“Everything that happened last year, are you… Is it just me? Even before all these new things started happening, I had nightmares and my anxiety went through the roof. I still flinch when a light bulb flickers, I know it’s stupid but-“ He shuts his mouth when

Steve grabs his hand suddenly.

"Jonny, it's not stupid. I had the same exact conversation with Nancy a few months ago." Jonathan is staring down at their hands with wide eyes; Steve simply rushes forward with the rest of his point. "I still have nightmares, and after being paranoid in the dark for about an hour I just turn on the lights and head downstairs. I make myself something to eat and watch a movie until I pass out; we're all dealing with this." He assures, squeezing Jonathan's hand in his own before releasing it hastily.

"I guess my coping mechanisms need a little work," Jonathan murmurs as he still stares down at his hands, fingers moving over the palm Steve had been holding. Steve watches the movement, enraptured in the soft sweeps of Jonathan's calloused fingers.

"Well maybe they need some work, but you gotta start coming to me or Nancy with this stuff. This whole 'keeping everyone at arms' length for fear of getting hurt' is a faulty tactic, if you can't trust me then you should talk to Nancy." He suggests, and Jonathan shakes his head.

"Of course I trust you; I'd never be friends with someone I didn't trust." He insists, and Steve feels warmth pooling in his chest.

"Tha- that's good to hear." He can't hold back the bright smile that stretches across his face, making his cheeks hurt a little.

"Shouldn't have told you, your ego is already bigger than

your hair, starting to get dangerous." Jonathan teases without heat, sounding a little less taxed by the events of the day.

"I have no idea what you're talking about; my hair is perfect, unlike yours!" He reaches up and tugs on a lock of Jonathan's bangs, who smacks his hand away with a grin. "But seriously, I know you're not used to having friends, but we're here for a reason. Nancy and me, we got your back, man." He pats Jonathan's shoulder and slips to his feet.

"I.. uh… Thanks." Jonathan mumbles, standing up slowly and crossing his arms.

"If you want us to bail, we will. We can discuss plans tomorrow; give you some time to get some rest." He hates to say it, but he wants to respect Jonathan's well-built boundaries. They were there for a reason, and if Jonathan wanted to let him in, then he'd do it on his own terms in time.

"No, I like having you guys here." He says casually, and Steve feels his heart fluttering at the words. "I don't want you to leave."

"Okay then, how about Nancy and I go pick up some burgers and bring them back here and we can have lunch with your brother?" He suggests with a clap of his hands, Jonathan frowns and nods.

"I should probably talk to Will while you're gone." He mutters and Steve shrugs unsurely. Jonathan's business with his

brother was something Steve knew nothing about; being an only child left him blind to sibling relationships.

"Do what you gotta, we'll be back in like twenty minutes." He turns on his heel and Jonathan follows him out of the room. Nancy and Will are seated at the kitchen table, talking quietly, and their expressions shift at the sight of the two stepping into the room. Nancy seems a little relieved to see Jonathan okay, Will seems to wilt with guilt.

"C'mon Nance, we're gonna pick up some food." He says with a jerk of his head, she takes the hint and stands up.

"Oh, I've got some money if you need it." Jonathan says, Steve quickly waves him off.

"It's on me," Jonathan frowns, mouth opening to protest. "You'll get it next time." He shrugs, Jonathan looks a little less uncomfortable at the thought and nods. "Will how do you feel about cheeseburgers?" He asks, Will's eyes shift from his brother to Steve.

"I don't like cheese on my burger, just ketchup." He says with a sure nod, Steve grimaces.

"Just ketchup, nothing else?" He asks, Will nods.

"Jonathan too," He adds, and when Steve gives a pleading look to the older Byers, the boy shrugs.

“We’re simple men,” He offers with an awkward chuckle.

“Ketchup, right… Okay, just ketchup. I’m guessing you don’t like pop, then?” He asks with a raised eyebrow, and the brothers share a look before smiling. They looked so similar, in their mannerisms and expressions, there was no doubt they were brothers.

“Coke is fine,” Jonathan assures, reaching out and patting Steve’s shoulder like he had done to him earlier.

“All right, Nance. Let’s get out of here before I stroke out from this information.” Steve shakes his head, wrapping his arm around Nancy’s shoulders and leading her out of the house.

-

Will is slowly being consumed by guilt over his earlier argument with Jonathan, he was never really one for confrontation and he could count the times he’d argued angrily with his older brother on one hand. They find Jonathan in his boxers with his pants around his ankles and tangled in the shower curtain, and Will would have laughed in Jonathan hadn’t seemed so out of sorts.

He was obviously exhausted and at the end of his rope, and adding onto the stress by bad mouthing him was a terrible thing to do. Steve shoos both him and Nancy from the bathroom and they head into the kitchen, Will offers her a glass of water but she declines.

“I shouldn’t have said those things,” Will confesses to Nancy as they sit down at the kitchen table, and she gives him a sympathetic look. He’d known Nancy most of his young life, for a while she took part in their antics before she grew up. At one point Jonathan had recalled for him that himself and Nancy had spent time together as kids because of Will and Mike. Will did remember running around Mike’s house playing hide and seek, Mike and Will versus Nancy and Jonathan. Lately even remembering things that had happened the year before suddenly seemed like they had happened eons ago.

“You and the boys are just trying to help, Jonathan gets that. But he’s just really worried about you, you know?” Nancy explains to him, reaching out and placing a hand on his, reminding him of his mother.

“I’m worried about him, he can’t do this alone just to protect me.” Will argues weakly, settling his head down on his arm with a sigh. “I can help, we’re stronger together.” He murmurs.

“Look, if anyone understands worrying about Jonathan it’s me and Steve.” Nancy assures, tilting her head to the side to meet his eyes. “But it’s not good for you guys to get involved in all of this.”

“If Jonathan is involved, so am I. We’re a package deal, that’s the way we’ve always worked.” Will says firmly, then as he quiets he bites his lip, another thought occurring to him. “Are you and Steve still dating?” He questions softly.

“Why do you ask?” Nancy squints her eyes, sitting up a

little and crossing her arms on the table.

"I dunno, I just… For a while I thought Jonathan was interested in you, but he doesn't seem to be anymore." He says hesitantly, glancing towards the hallway and making sure to keep his voice low.

"Jonathan and I are just friends," She says, leaning back in her chair and following his gaze, as if worried as well that Jonathan and Steve might walk in at any second.

"What about you and Steve?" Will frowns, and Nancy sighs through her nose.

"Steve and I are… Complicated…" She says vaguely, and Will's the one to look at Nancy in suspicion now.

"You noticed too," Will says, sure of himself.

"Noticed what?" Nancy asks, obviously feigning innocent ignorance.

"That Steve likes Jonathan," Will hisses, he was going out on a limb to say so. Nancy's eyes widen in the slightest, and she stammers for a moment. Then, she sighs and leans in a little, scooting her chair around the table closer to his as she does so.

“What do you know?” She demands with a whisper.

“Nothing, what do you know?” He asks quietly, smirking a little at her nosiness. Obviously Nancy had been noticing things; she was just as perceptive as Will was. But Steve and Jonathan were a little oblivious to a lot of things, so it would be a while before either of them really noticed what was going on.

“Nothing, it’s just a feeling.” Nancy defends with a shake of her head, scratching her cheek and turning her eyes to the table. “I don’t know about Jonathan, but it does seem a little like Steve likes him doesn’t it?” She inquires, Will nods slowly.

“Jonathan’s never really had friends before, he probably won’t notice for a while unless he feels the same way.” Will observes the older girl for a moment, calculating his next word. “You don’t have a problem with it?” He mumbles.

“No, do you?’ Nancy raises an eyebrow, Will shakes his head.

“Jonathan always said that you shouldn’t like things just because people tell you that you should. That goes for Jonathan too, if he likes a boy then he likes a boy, mom and me will love him no matter what.” Will says confidently, and Nancy smiles a little more sincerely.

“You’re a good little brother.” She promises, and Will grins.

“You’re a pretty good big sister I guess,” He jokes, laughing softly when she ruffles his hair and pushes him away by the head.

“We’ll keep this a secret between the two of us, yeah?” She asks him, blue eyes intelligent and observing, he felt connected to her on a different level.

“Of course,” He agrees, and they both look up when Jonathan and Steve walk in.

They proceed to have a discussion about burgers, in which Steve is disturbed by Jonathan and Will’s love of plain burgers with simply ketchup on them. It’s funny, his mother always felt the same way and it seemed like once again it was Will and his brother against the world. Steve and Nancy leave rather quickly after that, obviously trying to allow Jonathan to talk to Will in private.

Jonathan’s hair is still slightly damp from having fallen into the shower earlier, but he’s now dressed in his favorite hole-filled blue t-shirt and a pair of gray sweatpants. He still looks tired, the usual bags under his eyes having darkened and deepened. The scrape on his forehead is scabbed over, and the bruise on his cheek is slowly darkening.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it.” Will blurts after a moment of quiet, Jonathan offers him a small smile and sits across him at the table.

“I know,” He nods his head, crossing his arms on the table and leaning forward to rest his head on them. “I shouldn’t have gotten so angry with you, I’m just tired.” He admits, voice soft and gentle like Will is used to it being.

“I miss us talking to each other,” Will confesses truthfully, watching Jonathan’s eyes shift away from his. It wasn’t a sign of lying or of mistrust, Jonathan just often avoided eye contact more than most, it seemed to make him uncomfortable.

“I miss it too; you just stopped talking to me so I stopped trying.” Jonathan murmurs hesitantly.

“I stopped talking because I wasn’t ready to talk about *it* yet, doesn’t mean I wanted to stop talking to you about other stuff.” He lets the word ‘it’ imply the incident heavily, and Jonathan seems to understand it easily.

“What about now?” His older brother inquires, Will shrugs.

“Maybe, I guess.” He says quietly, dropping his eyes to the table.

“Well then until you’re sure, we can go back to our old talks.” Jonathan says, sure of himself, and Will smiles. Just like that, the gap between them was drawn together. It would just take a while for them to stitch it closed for good, but for now they were okay.

“I love you,” Will tells him earnestly, and Jonathan sits up to pull him into a hug.

“I love you too,” He assures, squeezing him tightly. “And I’m not gonna tell mom about this, and neither are you.” He mutters as he releases Will.

“I’m not backing off, if you’re involved, so am I.” Jonathan doesn’t seem too happy by Will’s words, but he nods gravely.

“I know, but you have to promise to listen to me no matter what.” He offers his hand in agreement, and Will smiles.

“I’ll do anything you say,” He promises eagerly as he takes Jonathan hand to seal the deal, but then falters and pulls his hand away. “On one condition.” He adds, Jonathan gives him a skeptical look. “You stop drinking.” He explains, and Jonathan looks suddenly ten years older.

“Will, it’s a lot more complicated than that.” He mutters weakly.

“Talk to me if you need to, and if I’m too young to understand then talk to Steve. Steve really likes you, you know, he cares about you.” Will tells him confidently, and Jonathan huffs a quiet laugh. “Please, Jonathan, at least try.” He pleads quietly.

“I’m not trying to screw up my life,” Jonathan says, rather

cryptically and vague as usual as he liked to be with other people, but not with Will.

"Yeah well you're doing a crappy job at it, so just stop okay? You're starting to scare me." He says softly, and Jonathan seems to sober at those words.

"Right, yeah, you're right." He nods, taking Will's hand and shaking it once more. "No more drinking, we keep all of this between us, and you do what I say." He agrees, and Will smiles.

"Got it."

"I'll probably regret this, but when Steve and Nancy get back we're making a plan." Jonathan fidgets with the hem of his tattered shirt, chewing at his lip. "And you're gonna help us."

"All right!" Will laughs, standing suddenly and colliding into Jonathan's arms for another hug. "We're gonna find her, Jonathan, for Mike." He says, squeezing his brother tightly.

"I hope so, Will, I really hope so." Jonathan sighs against his shoulder.

-

She lets out a shriek as her foot catches a mangled tree root, slamming into the cold and grimy ground. Her limbs shake as

she forces herself to her hands and knees, whimpering all the while, energy having dwindled into practically nothing. There's a noise behind her that cuts through the thick air and travels all around and back again, it rattles her bones and pushes her to panic. The sound was not human, nothing of the world she once lived in.

Eleven's feet slide against the slick ground as she scrambles to her feet, but before she can get up to a running speed a long and bony limb wraps around her ankles and she falls again with a scream. All she can think of is Mike, her friends, of Will and how much she wanted to go back to Hawkins.

Her powers have been utterly useless since her arrival, either she had used them all up throwing the Demogorgon and consequently herself into the Upside Down, or they had no weight in this world. Either way she was powerless, unable to do anything but claw at the ground and try to free her legs from their hold.

"No!" She struggles as she flips herself onto her back, drinking in the horrid sight of the beast before her. Dark eyes gleam at her hungrily, and as she's lifted into the air by her legs, her head slams into something solid. Everything blurs and swirls and goes sideways, and then she sees nothing at all.

4. The Gate

Notes for the Chapter:

> (This is an unusually early update, but I got ahead of myself in writing and I just received the sweetest message from a reader named Tiff that really made my week! So this one is for you, Tiff. I really hope you and everyone else enjoy!)
>
> (P.S. This chapter is a bit of a mess?? I dunno why, but it's filled with more perspectives and action and a little bit of background on Lonnie's relationship with the Byers. Trigger Warning for mentions of abuse.)

“How is he?” Nancy asks after a good five minutes of silence in the car, Steve taps his fingers lightly on the steering wheel and turns down the volume on the radio with a twist of the knob.

“Anxious, sullen, self-deprecating,” He lists, then smirks a little. “So… It’s pretty much a normal day for Jonathan Byers.” He jokes, Nancy shoots him a deadpan look and he sighs. Using humor as a defense mechanism was something he was working to fix, but honestly it wasn’t happening any time soon. “He’s just been worried that he’s the only one still trying to deal with the whole Dema-what-now thing.” He explains quietly.

“Demogorgon.” Nancy offers, Steve grins.

“Gesundheit,” He teases, the girl rolls her eyes with a small smile.

If there was one thing in this world Steve could do right,

it was make people smile, and God did he love to see Nancy Wheeler smile. It made him feel good about himself, feel like he had a specific purpose. But lately, even though he still loved to see Nancy smile, he couldn't get someone else out of his mind. Jonathan 'Brood Master' Byers.

"Do you like him?" Nancy asks suddenly, and Steve's mouth immediately goes dry. He didn't think that he was being that obvious, but then again he'd never really tried to be secretive with his affections before. What he wanted, he got, it was as simple as that… But this seemed anything but simple at this very moment.

"Like who?" He hums, as if he doesn't know already. Another thing Steve Harrington was good at was avoiding his problems and emotions, it came easier than breathing.

"Jonathan," Nancy caters to him, Steve keeps his eyes on the road and turns into the drive through burger joint. He rolls up to the ordering place and holds up a finger at Nancy to stall the conversation effectively. He takes a few minutes to order, and then continues to hold off on the talk until after he's paid for the food and they're back on the road.

"So?" Nancy questions impatiently, Steve clears his throat and hangs a left, licking his lips and opening his mouth. A thousand things rush through his mind, how would Nancy react if he told the truth, how did he even feel about Nancy anymore?

"What were we talking about again?" He mutters, feigning ignorance. Nancy smacks him in the shoulder in reply, and when he groans she pinches him for good measure.

“Jonathan,” She demands.

“Of course I like him, Nance. He’s my best friend.” Steve allows himself to say with a scoff, earning another smack to his shoulder. “Ow! Stop doing that! We can’t date if you’re gonna hit me all the time.” He huffs playfully, rubbing his arm to soothe the almost non-existent pain out of dramatic nature.

“Steve, I don’t think we should be dating anymore.” She says quietly, Steve twists the wheel and the car lurches onto a curb. He throws the car into park and turns to Nancy with wide eyes, mouth hanging open in shock.

“I was just joking, Nance.” He promises quietly, she shakes his head.

“Not because of that, Steve.” She reaches out hesitantly and takes his hand, both of her hands seeming tiny compared to his own. Jonathan’s were smaller than his, but not by much, and they were a little more calloused. Steve’s stomach twists, why was he thinking about Jonathan when Nancy was trying to break up with him?

“But we’re good together, Nance. You and me and Jonathan, monster hunting buddies for life!” He tries with a small smile, and Nancy frowns. Jeez, mentioning Jonathan left and right, this wasn’t going too well. But then again, when was the last time he really felt in love with Nancy Wheeler? The thought saddens him, that this love had slipped away without him even realizing it.

“We can still hunt monsters together, Steve. We can still be friends.” She assures, and he squeezes one of her tiny hands in his own. “But we aren’t in love anymore, we probably never were.” She explains softly, reaching up and placing her hand on his cheek.

“You’re the only reason Jonathan likes me,” He blurts suddenly, before blushing darkly and ducking his head when Nancy laughs.

“Maybe that was true a few months ago, but not now. Don’t you start to doubt your charm now, Steve Harrington.” She says kindly, pulling Steve into a tight hug. “You’re a good boyfriend, Steve.” She promises.

“Then why are you breaking up with me?” Steve mumbles into her shoulder, arms practically engulfing her small frame. He’s not sure why he’s so hesitant to let her go, he didn’t love her, but she came as a security to him. She was less of a girlfriend and more of a reassurance, a firm line in his life that provided stability.

“Because we’re not made for each other in that way, I love you and I care about you. But I can promise you that you have someone else in your future.” She presses her lips softly to his hair; he squeezes her a little tighter and then releases her.

“Jonathan,” He murmurs, Nancy nods. “Even if he’s queer, he might not like me.” He offers doubtfully, the girl sighs and shrugs.

“Some people won’t like you, it happens. But you’ve never really let anything get you down before, have you?” She questions, Steve smiles and shakes his head. “No, no you haven’t.” She reaches up and tugs on his ear gently. “But I don’t know, I kind of see something there.” She offers with a smirk.

“Yeah? You think so?” He murmurs, trying to keep the hope out of his voice, Nancy nods.

“Will sees it,” Steve feels his heart stop, his mouth dropping open once more as he stammers in horror.

“Will? Will noticed? What do you mean?! What did he say?!” He demands frantically, Nancy laughs. “It’s not funny, Nancy! He could tell Jonathan!” He turns and slams his head onto the steering wheel with a groan; the pain doesn’t dull his embarrassment.

“He’s not a snitch, Steve. Besides, he wants his brother to be happy, you could use him as a wing man.” She snickers; Steve squeezes his eyes shut and sighs.

“Great, a twelve year old as my wing man.” He grumbles sarcastically.

“He turned thirteen in August,” Nancy offers, Steve scoffs a quiet laugh.

“That makes a world of difference, thank you.” He turns

his head to look at Nancy, her eyes bright with amusement and fondness. He never wants to lose her, she was important to him, girlfriend or not.

"He's smart, Steve, and he knows his brother." She promises, patting his shoulder. "Now c'mon, I want to eat." She urges him, so he sits back against his seat and pushes the car into gear, pulling out from the curb.

First another interdimensional creature, now he was trying to woo Jonathan Byers… He hadn't quite decided which one was worse just yet, but he was leaning towards the latter. At least they had defeated an interdimensional monster before; he had absolutely no experience in what he was getting himself into now.

-

"What about what Jonathan and Nancy said?" Lucas asks warily as they all reunite at Mike's house after separating for a while to gather their items. Despite his hesitancy, Lucas seemed to have brought a decent amount of supplies. He was the bravest of them all, but also the most sensible, the rest of them were just recklessly loyal.

"Jonathan and Nancy are assholes, we have to find El." Mike says simply, packing his bag with a canteen and a flashlight. "My parents are staying out late for dinner, they won't be back for hours, we go search for the portal while it's still daylight. Dustin, you have your compasses?" He turns to the boy in question, who nods.

"Right in the front pocket of my bag, one for each of us, and I have an extra for Will but…" They all share slightly guilty looks, Will having gotten in trouble was a definite negative. He was

obviously intent on helping them, but he'd have to participate another time.

"That's good, and Lucas?" Mike questions, Lucas quickly opens his bag and produces his large army knife. "Perfect, now all we have to do is find the gate and get El."

"Are we going to go into the Upside Down if we find it?" Dustin asks suddenly, and Lucas offers a wary look to Mike.

"How else are we going to get her back?" Mike demands, Dustin lifts his hat off his head and brushes his fingers through his curls with a disbelieving scoff of a laugh.

"What if we can't get back?!" Lucas asks with a grand gesture of his arms, eyes wide.

"We'll find a way out, without Will we can't call El and try to get her to meet us. We'll have to find her without him." He explains, slipping his bag onto his shoulders.

"I really don't think-" Lucas falls abruptly silent at the sound of a thump upstairs, they all are quiet and still for a long moment. Footsteps trail above them, multiple sets of heavy footsteps.

"I thought you said your parents weren't supposed to be home for hours, Mike." Dustin mutters, Mike continues to glare a hole in the ceiling, an unsteady feeling swirling in his stomach.

“They aren’t,” He says softly before slowly creeping towards the basement steps. He grips the banister, leaning out to peer up at the closed basement door where he can hear movement in the kitchen. Dustin and Lucas approach him from behind with hesitation; Mike shakes his head when there’s a crash. His heart speeds up and thumps rapidly against his ribs. “That’s not my parents,” He whispers breathlessly.

-

“I’m busy, Lonnie.” Joyce mutters, not faltering in ringing up Mrs. Walton’s groceries. She had noticed him walk in, and she had absolutely no time for him. He had shown up the month before, got into an argument with Joyce, and left when Jonathan had gotten home. She wasn’t sure if he was scared of Jonathan, Joyce could probably take Lonnie better than Jonathan. Her baby boy had his aggressive moments, but she wasn’t sure if he could stand against his father.

“C’mon sweetheart, you used to always have time for me.” He chuckles; Joyce shakes her head and rings Mrs. Walton up, taking her offered money and placing it into the register before pulling out her change. The elderly woman is giving Lonnie the stink eye, and Joyce knows how she feels.

“I’m working, cut to the chase.” She snaps her fingers at him and then smiles kindly at Mrs. Walton. “Have a lovely day, Mrs. Walton.” She says, the old woman gives her a soft smile and a parting glare to Lonnie before shuffling away with her cart. One of the new employee bag boys follows her out with a promise to help her with her groceries, and Joyce finally turns to Lonnie.

He's leaning against the counter, smiling coyly at Joyce; she rolls her eyes and starts wiping the counter with a rag. She yanks her hand up when he reaches for it, slamming them both down onto the counter with a loud noise.

"What do you want, Lonnie?" She demands.

"I just want to know how my boys are." He explains with a shrug, before standing up and adjusting his dusty old leather jacket. "Haven't seen Will or Jon in a while," He sighs with false sentiment.

"Jonathan wants nothing to do with you, you know that." Joyce mutters with a shake of her head. She wants to yell, to scream, to rip his head from his shoulders and tear him to shreds. He'd hurt this family too much, hurt her boys too much, she'd never forgive him for that.

"Why does he hate me, Joycie?" He asks with a frown, as if he didn't already know.

"Treating someone like they're trash does that to someone, I would know." She huffs, leaning back against the counter behind her. He seems to push the comment aside, ignore it completely.

"Well what about Will, he's a good boy, how's he been?" Lonnie questions before smiling a little as Joyce glares at him. "I'm sure he's been asking to spend time with his good ol' dad." He chuckles.

“Last time I asked him, he said he didn’t want to.” She explains, and Lonnie’s face twists into a scowl. A curl of satisfaction forms in her stomach, he didn’t have a hold on them anymore that was for sure.

“I deserve to see my boys, Joycie… You can’t keep them from me,” He snaps at her, she raises her hands in an exasperated manner.

“I can’t force them to see you, Lonnie! It’s not my fault that Jonathan doesn’t like you and it’s not my fault that Will doesn’t want to see you. This is all on you, Lonnie; you’re the one who gave them a reason not to want to see you.” She shrugs, throws her rag onto the edge of the counter and turns away. “I’ll ask them again, but when they say no, don’t come to me!” She calls as she walks away.

-

“Burgers, burgers, burgers.” Steve sings as he steps into the house; Will and Jonathan are sitting on the couch with the TV playing. They’re watching some movie that is vaguely familiar to Steve, probably something old and weird; Jonathan probably liked to watch stuff like that.

“I don’t think you’ll be getting a record deal with that, Steve.” Jonathan comments with a tired smile, Steve scoffs.

“Bite me, Byers.” He says, holding the screen door open with his foot so that Nancy can wedge herself in with the drinks in her hands. “I have your ketchup burgers, you heathens.” He offers

one bag to Will when the boy approaches, who grins and takes the bag before patting his arm and slipping into the kitchen.

"Jonathan, do you want a plate?" Will calls; Steve turns his eyes to the young man in question Nancy slips past him into the kitchen. He's curled up on the couch, one leg against his chest and the other tucked underneath him. His head is resting on his knee and his eyes are enraptured with the TV.

"Yes please!" He says back, Steve glances into the kitchen and down at the bag in his hand.

"Nance, can you grab me a plate too?" He asks hesitantly, shifting in place.

"Sure, Steve." Nancy calls back to him, so he turns and steps over to the couch. He sinks down into the spot next to Jonathan, their shoulders barely brushing together. Jonathan doesn't glance away from his show, obviously not bothered by the older boy's presence.

He sort of wants to explain that he and Nancy had broken up, but at the same time he doesn't want to tell him until they're alone. Will steps back into the room with two plates, setting one down in front of Jonathan on the coffee table and then sitting down next to Steve and settling his own plate on his legs. The boy glances at Steve with a small smile, before dipping a fry in ketchup and biting into it.

Nancy returns and offers Steve his own plate with a small

smile, sitting down on the other side of Will. She sets the carton of drinks down on the table and they each reach for their own. Jonathan's hand brushes Steve's in the slightest, but once again, he doesn't notice. Steve can barely find the stomach to eat with his shoulder against Jonathan's and one of Jonathan's feet slightly tucked under Steve's thigh. But Jonathan was ever oblivious to it all, blissfully ignorant of Steve's agony.

"What are we watching?" Nancy asks, and Steve realizes he was staring at Jonathan for far longer than he should have been. Jonathan twists his head a little, blinking a few times in confusion as if just noticing Steve's presence, then leaning forwards to look past him and at Nancy.

"Rosemary's Baby," Jonathan explains, and Nancy hums.

"Is Will allowed to watch?" She questions, Will scoffs quietly in reply.

"I'm allowed to see what Jonathan sees, he's more of a baby than me." Will grins, Jonathan rolls his eyes. There's an anxiety to him though, he shifts a little.

"You're full of it," Jonathan mutters, Will snickers.

"Next time we see a horror movie, don't ask me to sleep in your room." The boy says simply, and his brother scowls as Steve and Nancy laugh.

“I didn’t want you to have nightmares and wake me up in the middle of the night,” He defends weakly, and Will nods as he takes a bite out of his burger.

“Just sayin’,” He says through a mouthful, Steve grins and ruffles the boy’s hair.

“Let up on your brother, kid, he’s had a rough day.” He chuckles, and Will pushes his hand away with a smirk. They spend the most of the movie eating, Nancy and Steve asking Jonathan questions about the plot, but near the end they all fall quiet as they’re caught up.

The movie has a disturbing plot twist near the end, and just before Steve can loudly protest in surprise, Jonathan’s head falls onto his shoulder. Steve falls completely still, barely turning his head to observe the situation. Jonathan had both knees curled up to the side, resting against the arm of the couch; his upper body leaned against Steve.

“That was good, I think.” Nancy mutters, sipping the remains of her soda. Will seems to have tuckered out as well, draped across Nancy’s lap with his mouth hanging slightly open. Nancy meets Steve’s eyes, smiling smugly.

“They knocked out pretty fast,” Steve mutters, Nancy nods and runs her fingers over Will’s hair gently.

“Mike says that whenever Will can’t sleep, Jonathan watches movies with him. Will can’t watch a movie without falling

asleep unless he's in a theatre." She giggles, and Steve smirks. "Should we leave them here?" She questions softly with a quirk of her eyebrow.

"No, I've got it. Jonny needs to sleep in a real bed for a few hours." He turns to the young man, slipping an arm around his shoulders and leaning forward to wedge his other arm under Jonathan's knees. Shifting off of the couch, Steve lifts Jonathan up and offers Nancy a smug look. She simply hides a laugh behind her hand and shoos him away, slowly moving Will off of her lap.

Steve hates himself a little as he stares down at Jonathan in his arms, he felt creepy and weird doing something like this. Jonathan wasn't his boyfriend, wasn't his anything special, they were friends. He felt like it was a privilege to carry Jonathan to bed, using the toe of his sneakers to open the bedroom door and slipping into the dimly lit room. He settles Jonathan down onto the mattress, and the movement stirs the younger in the slightest. Steve reaches for the tangled up blankets near the foot of the bed as Jonathan makes a soft groan of a noise and wipes at his eyes.

"Steve?" He mumbles, and the elder shakes his head before drawing the blankets over Jonathan. He barely looks at his face, if he looked at Jonathan he might stare some more, and he didn't want that. He did look rather cute in the moment though, tired and sleepy eyed.

"Go back to sleep, Byers." He instructs quietly, splaying the blankets out a little better and straightening out to his full height.

"Di'you carry me?" He asks tiredly, Steve places a hand on his forehead and pushes his head against the pillow. Jonathan makes

a soft grunt of a noise and stares up at him with squinted eyes, obviously expecting an answer.

"That couch is bullshit, if you're going to be of any use to us, you need real sleep." He says simply, and one side of Jonathan's mouth quirks up a little. "Now go back to bed, dumbass." He waves a hand at Jonathan, who turns on his side in the slightest and nuzzles his face into his pillow. Steve does his best not to melt into a puddle, because how can a *boy* be that cute?

"D'n leave, still makin' a plan." He mutters before falling still, Steve nods to nobody.

"Right, the plan." He whispers, then turns on his heel and walks out. Unlike Jonathan, Will is out like a light, and carrying him to his bed is uneventful. Although the kid did seem to drool a bit, which was quite gross, but he ignores it and makes sure the kid is out of his shoes and slipped under the sheets.

When he returns to where Nancy is still sitting on the couch, the girl is smiling brightly. Steve sinks down onto the opposite side of the couch, propping his legs up on the table and noticing that she had put away the plates.

"What are you smiling about?" He grumbles, feeling exposed. She knew everything; she knew how he felt about Jonathan. It was a little nerve wracking, but at the same time he found some sort of comfort in it. She didn't hate him for it, she wasn't leaving, this was okay between them.

“Oh nothing,” Nancy grins, standing up and heading over to the stack of VCR tapes on the shelf next to the TV. “Let’s watch something else.” She hums.

-

“We have to get out of here,” Dustin whispers frantically to his friends, and then both he and Lucas look to Mike.

“Why are you looking at me?! I don’t have a plan!” He hisses back at them, there’s another thud from upstairs and they fall silent once more. It seemed like a few people were going through the house, it wouldn’t be long until they decided to come into the basement to search as well.

“If Eleven was here…” Lucas states ominously, and Mike scowls before glancing around the basement. He had to think quickly, he wasn’t sure exactly who was in the house but obviously they couldn’t be good news of any sort. His bet was on the bad government men that were looking for Eleven the year before. Something occurs to him then, and he hurries across the room.

The fort is there, without having been touched except for the addition of Mike and the gang’s small items reserved for Eleven’s anticipated return. Mike pushes back the curtain of sheets and looks back to Dustin and Lucas, who are standing in the middle of the room with puzzled faces.

“Dustin, grab the mannequin head with Nancy’s Leia wig on it.” He instructs quietly, Dustin makes a face but follows his commands. “Lucas, get me my Star Wars shirt off the couch.” He waves his hand and begins to set up a stack of pillows. He pulls an

extra flashlight from his bag and switches it on, settling it inside the fort. Dustin hands him the mannequin head, and Lucas gives him the shirt.

He quickly slips the shirt over the pillows in an attempt to create a solid figure, and then tucks the mannequin head into it. He takes the wig off with a soft scoff and then leans back to replace the curtain sheet. It appears as if a figure is sitting just inside, and he grins as Lucas and Dustin pat him on the shoulder.

“Okay, let’s go.” They retreat over to the stairs, slipping just out of sight and crouching down. Mike clears his throat, glancing up at the stairs before taking in a deep breath. He reaches out and grabs one of his action figures, and chucks it at the far wall.

Someone upstairs says something, voice muffled and deep.

“Eleven, be quiet!” Mike hisses a little too loudly, and then they all scrunch down at the door to the basement opens.

Footsteps slowly descend down, two sets of them. Mike leans up in the slightest as they reach the bottom, spotting two official looking men in jumpsuits. One of them has a gun and is hovering closer to the couch while the other heads towards the fort.

“Come on out, kids… We just wanna talk.” The man with the gun says, aiming it towards the fort. Mike turns his head towards Dustin and Lucas, and they nod. They slowly creep forward to the edge of the stairs, risking being sighted as they crouch into the light. Mike wraps his hand around the banister and looks back at his

friends, he holds up three fingers.

Three.

Two.

One.

They take off in a scramble of sneakers squeaking and frantic shouting, a gunshot is fired but Mike doesn't slow. He races until he's out of the house, grabbing his bike and breaking into a run before slinging his leg over the seat. He pedals as fast as his feet can go, and he feels relieved when he turns his head and sees Lucas and Dustin doing the same. There doesn't seem to be anyone following them, which is odd, but they keep pedaling regardless.

They had to get to Will's house and warn everyone; if they were searching for Eleven, they might go to the Byers' house next. Jonathan and Nancy would know what to do, and they could always go to Hopper for help.

-

Jonathan finds that he has no control over the body whose eyes he's seeing out of. It's obviously not his own, it feels foreign, and the labored breaths coming from the person are much higher in pitch than his own voice. He can feel the heavy air in their lungs, the fatigue weighing them down. The eyes are scanning what seems to be a muddy forest floor, decrepit with black roots that almost seemed to look like tendrils slipping out of the ground.

The eyes peer up, and Jonathan lays eyes on the surroundings. The air is filled with spores, and the trees tower high above, reaching into an endless black sky that seemed to hold no visible boundary. The sound of loud booming steps behind the person sets him off, and he's suddenly silently rooting for the person whose body he inhabits.

They collapse to the ground, tiny hands trying to keep them off the ground. A child, this was a child! His tired mind sluggishly reminds him of the last child in his dreams, and he realizes that this is Eleven. She lets out a shriek and they're tugged backwards, hands clawing at the ground.

Jonathan wakes with a jolt, sitting up in a panic and finding himself in his room. He can vaguely recall having a conversation with Steve, who had apparently carried him to his bed. He really didn't have the focus to be embarrassed about that right now though, something felt off.

His door is swung open suddenly; Will stands in the doorway with Steve and Nancy behind him. The teens seem confused and a little concerned, Will looks downright panicked.

"Eleven's been taken!" Will exclaims, Jonathan nods.

"I know, I saw." He replies hoarsely, and watches as Steve and Nancy seem to grow more concerned as Will nods. "We need to find her before it's too late." He mutters, shifting his blankets off of him and standing up.

"How do we do that?" Will questions eagerly.

“I have a feeling, let’s go.” He grabs a jacket off of his desk chair and snags his boots. “Nancy, where’s my dad’s gun?” He asks distractedly as he reaches into his closet and pulls out a bat, throwing it to Steve. Steve scrambles to catch it, holding it with confusion.

“It’s in the trunk of Steve’s car,” She offers, and Jonathan nods.

“Go get it, we might run into trouble along the way.” He waves her off with his hand, shrugging his jacket on and slipping his shoes onto his feet.

“Are you sure about this, man?” Steve catches him by the arm as he tries to step out of the room. Jonathan adjusts his jacket and avoids his eyes for a moment, before glancing up at him.

“She’s just a kid, Steve. She needs our help, I’d hope someone would do the same for Will if it was him.” He says quietly, turning his head to where Will was still standing. “Go get some flashlights; we’re going into the woods.” He instructs, and the boy barely hesitates before turning and heading out of the room.

He finds Steve still staring at him when he steps into the hall, and he offers a quirk of his eyebrow. Steve had his back last time, that didn’t mean he had to this time; Jonathan wouldn’t blame him if he wanted out. Steve sighs and glances down at the bat in his hands, twisting it gently in his grip.

“Let’s do this, Byers.” He smirks in the slightest, and Jonathan smiles.

There’s a sudden commotion coming from the living room, the sound of the other boys arriving in panic. Jonathan rushes out and finds the boys all red in the face and shouting at the same time with Nancy at the head.

“Someone broke into my house,” She explains, Jonathan glances to all of the boys, who seem frantic and scared.

“They’re looking for Eleven,” Mike insists, and Jonathan nods. They thought that they had found her already, which meant that there was some sort of activity going on that suggested there was a pathway opening.

“They don’t know where she is, we’re gonna find her first. I hope you guys have flashlights.” He gestures to Mike, who quickly smiles and nods.

“How are we going to find her? The compasses?” Will asks suddenly from the hall doorway, Jonathan turns his head. He takes two flashlights from him and hands one of them to Nancy.

“You’re going to lead us to her, Will.” He mutters, Will’s eyes widen.

“B-But I don’t…” He shakes his head, and Jonathan nods

to him once more.

"You can, I know you can. You get me to the gate, I'll bring Eleven back." He assures.

"These are some heavy promises to make, Jonny." Steve mutters, and Jonathan huffs. He can understand disbelief, but he doesn't have time to argue. They were with him or they weren't, and he knew that if none of them followed him, he'd still go into the woods alone. This was his mission; something in his gut was telling him that this was what he was supposed to do.

"Will, connect to Eleven." Jonathan tells him quietly, Will barely stammers before glancing to the other boys. They all look solemn, determined, and ready to trust their friend. He seems to gain some courage then, taking in a deep breath and nodding. He closes his eyes and ducks his head, and they wait. They stand in still silence for a minute or so, before Will makes a startled noise and turns on his heel.

"This way," He urges, and walks right out the back door. They walk quietly, flashlight beams sweeping back and forth in restless motions. Jonathan feels strangely calm, walking right behind his brother with a flashlight in one hand and his other swinging at his side. It feels like he's buzzing with energy, like he'd been dosed with pure caffeine. He hadn't felt this awake in weeks.

Will suddenly takes a sharp left, they head deeper into the woods, everything dark and quiet other than the rustle of leaves and the occasional whisper of someone behind him. Nancy and Steve were a few steps behind Jonathan, sharing a flashlight and keeping track of the other boys.

There's a sudden raise in the land, and they head up an incline without too much effort. There's a distant light, which Jonathan realizes is the energy company that had been the source of all their problems the year before. He hoped they wouldn't have to hop the fence; they would probably set off some sort of alarm.

Will stops suddenly; Jonathan slows to a halt as well, looking around warily. Will glances back at him, eyes meeting his, looking slightly dazed with a little bit of blood on his lip from his nose. He turns his head slightly and points off to the side, not past the fence, but on the side of it.

"Somewhere over there," He offers softly.

"Okay," Jonathan clears his throat and steps around the target area, looking for any sort of sign. He jumps a little when a hand grabs his shoulder, looking back to find Steve staring at him soulfully.

"I'll go with you, when we find it." He promises, and Jonathan shakes his head.

"No way," He mutters, Steve scowls and spins him around, shaking him a little.

"You can't do this alone, Byers!" He hisses, and Jonathan shoves him away.

“I need someone to be able to pull me back out, and you and Nancy need to watch the boys.” He explains firmly, Steve’s expression softens.

“It’s dangerous, Jonny.” He insists, Jonathan nods his head and turns away.

“I’ll be careful,” He promises, not looking back. “Don’t worry about me, I’m coming back.” He shines his flashlight onto an indent in the forest floor, his heart skipping a beat. There’s a faint reddish glow coming from the middle of it, and Jonathan shuffles closer. “This is it.”

“Be careful,” Nancy warns, and Jonathan nods as he sits down and edges his feet closer to the glow of the ground. It feels freezing compared to the cold air around them, and he shivers as he shifts forward.

“I’ll be right back, okay?” He turns his eyes to Will, who seems worried and hesitant. “I’m coming back.” He swears firmly, and the boy nods. “Now you stay here, but if anyone comes, you scatter and we’ll meet back up at the house.” He explains and everyone nods in understanding, He hands Steve his flashlight.

Jonathan pushes himself forward, legs slipping into the crack in the fabric of the dimension. He slips down and is suddenly falling, and he lands with a splash in a shallow pool of water. Immediately, he’s freezing, shivering and trying to breathe through the thick air. He glances around the hellish realm of his nightmares, and when he glances up, there’s only pitch black nothing.

He scrambles to get out of the wet muck he's soaking in, it feels sticky on his skin and makes his clothes feel like heavy concrete. He spins in a circle before a feeling in his gut makes him stop, he starts walking then, scanning around and navigating through stray roots and matching gleaming black trees.

"Eleven?" He calls softly, it echoes out beyond him in a muffled noise.

He comes upon a house, and he quickly recognizes it as his own. It seems broken down, more than it already was, and it's covered with roots and dust. He steps through the barren backyard and up the steps to the back screen door, walking inside as quietly as he can.

The air smells foul, like rank mold and rotting garbage, he lifts a hand over his mouth and turns the corner out of the kitchen and into the hall. There's a noise somewhere down the hall, and he can still see the mark on the floor where they burned the Demogorgon, black and soot covered with splatters of blood trailing away.

He opens up Will's door, finding it as if it had been abandoned years ago. He hears a thump from inside his own room, and turns to approach the door. His hand shakes as he reaches for the knob, and he twists it as quietly as he can. The door doesn't want to open, but with a little pressure from his shoulder, it slides open roughly. The rank smell grows ten times stronger as he opens the door, eyes watering with it.

He observes the room in horror, finding it to be a mess of things piled up along the walls with gelatinous translucent oil covering almost everything. He steps into the room, his shoe squishing on some of the gunk that was everywhere. He surveys the room, eyes wide and seeking, he could feel that someone was in here.

There's a muffled noise, and in the far corner of the room, a pile of goo covered clothes moves ever so slightly. He hurries over to the clothes and hovers his hands over the pile, hesitating just a moment before pulling on it to remove some of the clothes. They fall away with a squelch, falling near his feet, he tries not to gag.

A muffled voice, and he pulls more of the clothes away, and as he pulls at the layers the struggling and noise increases. Then he's staring at Eleven, curled up in a ball and glazed in a sheen of goo and moving weakly.

"Eleven," He whispers, she opens her eyes slowly and coughs weakly. Her doe brown eyes stare at him with hazy focus and she moans quietly, hand reaching up at him. "I'm gonna get you out of here, sweetheart." He murmurs, but right when he places a hand under her head the door is forced open with a loud slam.

The roar of the creature shakes him to the bone, and he narrowly avoids a limb as he dives to the floor and slides through the oil. He slips under his bed to reach the other side, the monster is just as he'd observed earlier. Multiple sets of eyes, hairy, there's a big body that the skin is pressed thin against bone underneath it. The limbs are many, at least six he counts, and they each have three claws.

He scrambles underneath the monster's body and out the

door; a limb reaches for him and nicks his shoulder. He stumbles, but does his best not to slow down. He had to draw it away and come back, he'd come back for her. It follows him with limbs balancing on the floor and the walls and the ceiling, barely squeezing through the hall. Jonathan scrambles out the front door and across the front porch, leaping over the rails and around to the back. He can hear the monster hurrying to follow, he races back inside and forces his way back into the monster's nest in his room.

Eleven hasn't moved, so he quickly lifts her into his arms and rushes out. The monster is trying to fit through the back door, snarling and screeching, Jonathan runs out and into the woods.

"C'mon, c'mon, we gotta find a way out of here." His lungs feel heavy and his legs are shaking, but he has to find the gate again. He tries to keep his footing, but he keeps stumbling against the roots and having to readjust his hold on Eleven. He won't let her go, he won't drop her, she needs him.

"The night…" Eleven mutters, and Jonathan shushes her before taking off in one direction at the sound of the monster's chilling shriek. He rushes through the trees, searching for any sign of light, any sign of home.

"Which way's home?" He whispers, Eleven shifts, sticky and damp in his arms.

"Down…" She grumbles, seemingly asleep or unconscious. He scans their surroundings and sees a steep incline, and quickly runs down the hill, barely stopping himself from tripping forward. He spots a bit of glow from the ground ahead, laughing in relief as he reaches it. There's a shuffle nearby, like the monster was climbing

through the trees or something of the sort while looking for them, he didn't have much time.

"Okay, okay, here we go." He kneels down and settles Eleven's feet against the opening, pushing her forward. She slips into the ground and Jonathan feels someone pulling her so all he has to do is make sure her arms don't get caught and then he drops down into the hole as well.

Two hands grab hold of his ankles and tug him out, and it's like the entire world flips as he enters his own dimension once more. He takes in a big breath of the thin, warm air, vision flashing with lights and black spots as he lies on the leaves staring up at the canopy of dark trees above him. But they're not gleaming black and reaching towards an endless sky, these were filled with life and praising the stars and clouds above.

"Jonny?" Steve leans over him, a hand on his cheek, hot compared to his freezing cold skin. "Jonny, you okay?" His voice is slightly muffled, and then it's like his ears pop and he can hear multiple voices talking frantically. His stomach lurches with sudden nausea and he rolls over onto his side, expelling the contents of his stomach onto the forest floor. As he finishes retching, the thin air makes his lungs and throat itch and he begins to cough violently. There are a few flashlight beams shining about, and as he tries to sit up, Steve is pulling him into a firm embrace.

"You scared the shit out of me, Byers." He scolds; Jonathan smirks against his shoulder and hugs him back. He coughs a few more times just to clear his lungs of any sort of nasty stuff that might have filled them during his visit to the Upside Down.

“Where’s Eleven?” He croaks, voice hoarse and weak. Steve releases him and he turns his head, finding Eleven leaning back against Mike’s chest with Lucas and Dustin sitting on either side of her sprawled out legs. Her eyes are a little glossy; she seems exhausted, but overall okay judging from the small smile on her face as the boys talk to her excitedly. Nancy is kneeling just next to Steve, and Will is standing between the two groups, staring at his brother worriedly and occasionally glancing back at his friends.

“You were only gone a few minutes, how did you manage to look like hell in such a short time?” Steve mutters humorously, and Jonathan can’t help but grin. He does sort of look like hell from what he can tell, he’s sticky with muck, slime, and sweat. His hair is hanging in his face and matted together with the monster’s sludge, and there’s a few leaves that have tangled themselves in as well.

“You know, Eleven gets the welcome wagon and all I get is a hug from Nancy Wheeler’s lousy boyfriend.” He snorts, Steve glances over at Nancy and they share a look, one that Jonathan doesn’t recognize.

“We’re actually not dating anymore,” Nancy explains quietly, but not sadly, just a little awkward. Jonathan is jolted by the news, shocked really; they were such a good couple! At the same time, a small part of him makes his heart stutter just a bit in hope. He crushes the feeling quickly, dousing the flame without a moment’s notice.

“Oh, I’m-I… I’m sorry.” He shakes his head, avoiding their eyes and blushing in the slightest. Another cold breath in and his throat locks up, he hunches over and coughs harshly, wheezing slightly.

“Okay, Mr. Hero, let’s get you back to the house before you get pneumonia.” Nancy says as she stands up, and when Steve joins her and holds his arms out, Jonathan grabs them to heft himself to his feet. Steve settles a hand around his waist when he wobbles slightly, keeping a firm hold on the shorter teen.

The boys help Eleven up; Mike and Lucas slip her arms over their shoulders, but before they can move Mike lets Dustin take his place and hurries over.

“Jonathan,” Mike says, and they stop in their steps as Mike lunges forward to hug Jonathan. “Thank you,” He tells Jonathan sincerely, and Jonathan smiles as he pats the boy’s back gently.

“You’re welcome, Mike.” He murmurs, and watches as Mike lets go and turns away, colliding with Will and thanking him as well.

“C’mon, you and El have a lot of catching up to do.” He wraps his arm around Will’s shoulders and starts ushering him to catch up with the others. Will glances back at Jonathan nervously, but seems to relax when Jonathan waves him off with a small smirk. They catch up with their friends, talking and chattering.

“We better get out of here, those government guys could catch on at any time.” Jonathan finally says, and then they’re walking quietly, Nancy leading the way with a flashlight. Steve’s hand is warm against his cold and slimy waist, a firm reassurance. He feels absolutely disgusting and his adrenaline was still running in the slightest, but Steve’s presence was calming him down.

“You really need a shower now, dude.” Steve snickers as they break from the trees and head through the backyard up the porch steps.

“Really? I think it’s a pretty good look for me.” Jonathan jokes, watching Steve’s eyes light up as he laughs.

“Jonathan Byers with a sense of humor, who would have guessed?” He teases, Jonathan shoves him gently and Steve glances over to Nancy. The girl steps out of the kitchen and into the living room with the kids without a word. Steve rubs his neck, seeming suddenly shy for once, before nodding towards the hallway. “I guess you should go get cleaned up.”

“Yeah, right.” He agrees quietly, feeling the slightest bit embarrassed at the fact that Steve suddenly seemed awkward around him. He thought they were mostly past that, but he supposed not. He turns away, shuffling into the hallway.

“Byers,” Jonathan turns his head, Steve’s standing just behind him with his arms crossed.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re okay.” He says sincerely, and Jonathan nods before turning away. He slips into the shower, feeling heavy and sick and completely exhausted. He leans back against the door with a soft squish of a noise, his jacket completely caked in muck and goo.

Jonathan takes a deep breath, the air still feeling funny in his lungs, and then turns on the shower. His reflection in the mirror shows him the true damage, his skin looks a little paler than usual and his cheeks and nose are red from the cold. His hair is wild and tangled, and most of his body is covered in dirt and slime.

He begins to strip his clothes off, and it takes him a few minutes to get his shirt over his head. It's stuck to his skin, and his shoulder is starting to ache and burn from the earlier impact of the creature's claws. He finally shrugs the dirtied and torn shirt off and turns to observe his shoulder in the mirror. The wound is bright red, sluggishly bleeding and dirty, a jagged slash down across his collar bone.

Jonathan gives a cursory glance, finding no creature in his reflection or behind him. He slips off the rest of his clothes and gets in the shower; the spray of water doesn't do much but remove the mud and leaves off of him. He has to scrub the slime off of him, and when he turns slightly the hot water stings his shoulder.

He runs his fingers through his hair and stands under the spray with his eyes closed, he pulls out clots of dirt and leaves and then pushes it back out of his face. Jonathan turns his eyes to the ceiling; the tile above is cracked and dirty. He takes in another deep breath, and tries to relax.

-

"I should be getting home to the boys soon," Joyce comments idly as they sit together in the diner sharing a slice of pie. It had been a nice evening; Jim had taken off of work early so they could go out for dinner.

“I’m sure they’re fine, I haven’t heard any fire trucks.” Jim jokes with a small smile, eating another forkful of pie. “Besides, you should take some time for yourself.” Joyce grins, glancing out of the window for a moment before looking back.

“You sound like Jonathan,” She scoffs, Jim raises his eyebrows and nods.

“Jonathan’s a smart boy; he was raised by a great mother.” He says with a gesture of his fork before picking up his cup and taking a sip of his coffee.

“And a crappy father.” She scoffs; Jim makes a face and shrugs before nodding.

“Speaking of, I saw Lonnie skulking around town earlier, he been to see you?” He questions, she nods slowly and pushes her hair out of her face.

“He’s asking to see the boys again,” She admits, Jim scoffs and leans back in his seat. “I told him that they don’t want to see him, but he likes to make sure we know we belong to him.” Jim seems to be disgusted by the mere thought of it, staring down at the plate with furrowed brows and a scowl.

“Well he doesn’t, and don’t let him scare you.” Jim shakes his head.

“I’m not scared of Lonnie, he’s just a dick.” She takes a sip of her soda and sighing quietly. “The boys, I’m not so sure.” She confesses hesitantly.

“You said Jonathan can’t stand him,” Jim murmurs carefully, scratching at his scruff as he surveys the diner with his usual cop instincts. “What about Will?”

“Lonnie had years to scar Jonathan; Will got the tail end of it. He wanted to spend time with the father he never got to know.” Joyce explains quietly, voice falling into a whisper. “Jonathan didn’t have the nerve to tell me what Lonnie was doing until after I kicked him out.” She sniffs, tears welling into her eyes.

“He beat the boys?” She watches Jim’s body tense a little more, there had always been rumors that Lonnie had violent tendencies he often took out on Joyce but there was never any real incident. At least, none that the town knew of. The Byers kept to themselves, they were quiet and subdued. Joyce could raise hell if she wanted and Jonathan was practically a tornado of rage at times, but mostly they just wanted to be left alone.

“A smack to the face, a rough tug, a push. He never touched Will, he was little and frailer than Jonathan, he cried when he fell down. I guess he knew Will would snitch on him in a second, Jonathan would never say a word.” Joyce lets her mind drift to memories of the little boy who used to smile so brightly at her every day, those smiles were rarer but they were still so bright.

“He was submissive, afraid of him, Lonnie took advantage of it.” Jim states gravely, and Joyce nods.

“He said he was trying to toughen him up; Jonathan was obedient and quiet, afraid to upset the balance…” She leans forward and pushes her drink away from her. “I kicked Lonnie out because we were arguing and he raised his hand to me. Will was at school, Jonathan and I never told him what happened.”

“He hit you?” Jim demands quietly, Joyce clears her throat and shakes her head.

“He’d grabbed me before, got into screaming matches, but I’d never seen him violent with us.” She swears quietly, rubbing a hand over her cheek. “Jonathan was home sick from school, when he was young he’d get really bad stomach aches because of anxiety, he was always sick and throwing up,” She offers in explanation. “He was scared of the kids that bullied him, scared of his own shadow I thought… But he was right there the second Lonnie tried to hurt me, he stood between us and that prick thought he could lay a hand on my baby boy.” Her voice shakes, not with tears but with rage.

“How old was he?” Jim might have known about how long Joyce and Lonnie had been separated, but Jonathan and Will he was still getting to know piece by piece.

“Twelve, a little over four feet tall and maybe ninety pounds soaking wet. The boy who was terrified of spiders but pitched an absolute fit if I tried to kill them.” She smiles a little, but she doesn’t really feel all that happy. “For some reason he couldn’t stand by and let Lonnie do what he wanted, but he didn’t stand a chance against his father. Lonnie knocked him to the floor with the back of his hand and I lost it, I threw him out and there’s no turning back from that. I don’t regret it.” She shrugs, clasping her hands together and pressing her

mouth against them.

“Fierce like his mom then, seems like a good boy. I’d like to get to know him a little better.” Jim admits with a shrug, and Joyce feels her heart flutter. “Lonnie ever gives you guys any trouble; I want you to call me. You can pass that along to Jonathan and Will as well.” He tells her sincerely, and she smiles before reaching out and taking his hand.

“You’re cute when you’re protective,” She mutters, Jim makes a soft huff of a noise and the side of his mouth quirks with pride. “Thank you, Hop.”

-

Nothing could describe the relief Steve felt when he’d pulled Jonathan from the portal to the Upside Down. He had been filthy, freezing cold, and a little disoriented. He’d puked his guts up and coughed up a storm for a bit, but then he seemed himself once more, he had even cracked a joke.

Returning to the house, Nancy had taken charge of the kids, while Steve stood to the side without a word to say. Younger kids liked him, he could have casual conversations with a four year old, but once they got to a certain age they tended to find him boring or stupid. He’d rather steer clear of the almost teenagers, as Mike had often dubbed him ‘Nancy’s Idiot Boyfriend’ and made faces at him.

However, it’s easy with Will; the kid is quiet and smart. He doesn’t expect Steve to talk, and in return, Steve does the same for them. There’s a mutual respect between them, and the thing they had in common was caring about Jonathan. Sure Will pulled his leg on

occasion, but there was no real malice in it, he felt like Will might even like him sometimes. He really hoped so, the way to get to Jonathan was through his family.

Eventually Nancy elects to take Steve's car and take the kids back to the Wheeler residence and return later. They leave with a bustle of noise, leaving only the sound of the shower running and a clock in the kitchen ticking.

He's left alone with Will after Nancy leaves with the others, they were going to take Eleven back to the Wheelers' house to get clean and clothed. The Byers didn't have much that Eleven could wear, Will and Joyce's clothes were too small and Jonathan's were too big. He's surprised that Will decided to stay, rather than go with his friends.

"I want to make sure Jonathan's okay," Will says quietly when Steve asks him, he'd been sitting silently on the couch with his knees hugged to his chest and staring off into nothing. He looked distracted, lost in thought, probably remembering his own experience in the hellish dimension Jonathan had briefly visited.

"He seemed okay to me," Steve offers with a small smile, which falters when Will looks over at him with the most unnerving straight face Steve has possibly been given.

"It's different, you don't get it." Will mumbles, placing his mouth behind his knees and going back to staring at nothing.

Steve isn't sure how to respond, so he just decides to shut

up. Will was obviously a little messed up at the moment, and he was suddenly distracted with the idea that Jonathan's experience might do something similar to him. He seemed okay, exhausted and dirty, but no different from first glance.

The sound of the bathroom opening catches his attention, and he listens as Jonathan's door squeaks open as it's pushed. There's quiet then, and after a moment, Jonathan steps out of the hallway. His hair is pushed back and damp, he's wearing a long sleeve shirt and plaid pajama bottoms. His hands are tucked under his arms and his eyes scan right to left through the living room.

"Where is everyone?" His voice shakes a little, and Steve notices he's shivering slightly. Will stands up suddenly and walks hurriedly over to his older brother, hugging around his waist and burying his face against Jonathan's chest. Jonathan frowns, running a hand over his brother's hair and patting his back.

"They went to get Eleven cleaned up and they figured Nancy might have something that would fit her." Steve offers after a moment, and Jonathan nods minutely before making a soft noise that sounded like a shudder.

"It takes a few hours to get warm again," Will tells Jonathan solemnly, taking his brother by the hand and pulling him to the couch. Jonathan is sat on Steve's left and Will disappears into the hallway, Steve's thigh is against Jonathan's and he can feel him trembling.

Will returns with a few blankets and a bottle of water, he places himself on Jonathan's left before draping the blankets all along their laps. Jonathan pulls his legs up onto the couch to cross them

and Will slips away to look through the movies.

Steve realizes after a moment that he has quite possibly the least amount of self-control possible as he wraps his arm around Jonathan and pulls him closer. He freezes as Jonathan winces, letting up on his grip immediately. Jonathan takes the initiative and scoots a little further against Steve, Will turns the movie on and then hurries back to the couch, slipping under the blankets and snuggling into his brother's side.

Steve wonders what it was like to have a sibling, a lot of times it seemed like they were a pain in the ass. From watching Nancy and Mike, that notion seemed to be true, but at the same time seeing Jonathan and Will was like getting a whole different perspective. Jonathan held Will close, affection without hesitation, without shame or embarrassment. Perhaps before it all they weren't this close, but something told Steve that wasn't likely.

Jonathan shifts a little and leans further into Steve, a small shiver working through him as the tape on the VCR begins to whir to life on the screen. He wondered where he stood with Jonathan, this was closer than he'd ever gotten with any guy friend of his... But that scene between Nancy and Jonathan that Steve had witnessed seemed extremely intimate before it turned out to be otherwise. Maybe Jonathan was just an affectionate person once you got to know him. Or maybe it was just the threat of hypothermia and the scarring effect of the Upside Down had scrambled his brain.

"This okay?" Jonathan mutters as his head drops against the crook of Steve's shoulder, he's still shivering but not as bad now. Steve recalls that relief from earlier, his heart seems to settle at the firm weight settled against him, a reassurance that Jonathan was okay.

“Yeah,” He whispers as the movie begins, pressing his lips to the top of Jonathan’s head and sighing when Jonathan doesn’t move away or tense in the slightest. “Of course.”

5. The Loyal Ones

Notes for the Chapter:

> (I just finished Chapter 6 and started Chapter 7, things are going great. I must warn that while this chapter is a little slow, it's about to get serious. I'm expecting about 9 chapters, but we'll just see. Also, I might have a sort of continuance planned, but that's for a later date. I hope you all enjoy!)
>
> (P.S. Trigger warning for child abuse in this one, a physical altercation occurs and homophobic slurs are thrown.)

A lot has happened in one day, but all Mike can really care about is the fact that Eleven is home. It happened without much effort, which puts him on edge; it seemed too easy and almost surreal. He keeps one arm around El almost always, and it seems like Lucas and Dustin aren't straying far either. They were overjoyed to have their friend back, she had become one of them and they weren't letting her go anytime soon.

Will, though, had kept his distance for some reason, kept quiet and off to the side while the others caught up eagerly. They had waited for Jonathan's return with Eleven impatiently, and Will had kept closer to Steve and Nancy than his own friends. He was obviously worried, shoulders tense and eyes stuck on the small reddish rupture in the ground. He had never come into contact with Eleven before, his brother held priority over the strange girl he'd never really met before.

Steve had paced for a while, and after a few minutes he was insisting that he should be there with Jonathan. Nancy kept him from getting too restless, and made sure that he stayed put like the rest of them. When the hole in the ground had made a noise that

sounded like a muffled screech, they'd all fallen deathly still and quiet.

And just like that, there was a pair of feet coming from the hole. Steve and Mike had rushed forward at the same time, pulling Eleven out into the leaves. The boys cheered and Nancy helped them pull her off to the side, but Will and Steve stayed right by the portal. Eleven was covered in gross slime and was dazed and confused, but she was in one piece and safe. Most of them turned their attention back to the portal where Steve and Will hadn't budged an inch. Everyone could hear Steve's sigh of relief at the sight of Jonathan's muddy sneakers.

"Jonathan!" Will was shuffled to the side and Steve had yanked him out, he looked far worse than he should have for just ten to fifteen minutes there. He was covered in some of the same sludge as Eleven, and he'd rolled over to vomit and cough his lungs out. He sounded like the time Mike had pneumonia the year before, it had been agony, he winced in sympathy for the older boy.

Eleven had been much more still, so much more silent. At first Mike had been worried she wasn't alive at all while Nancy observed her and tipped her head to the side. It hadn't taken but a few calls of her name to have the girl blinking dazedly at them all. Mike had slipped behind her to help her sit up and she'd coughed a few times and spit out some of the awful looking goop she was covered in.

"El? El, can you hear me?" He had muttered, running a hand through her slightly longer hair to slick it back away from her face. Her body was freezing cold to the touch and her lips were a blueish tint, and if it weren't for her ragged coughing she could have been compared to a corpse.

“M-Mike?” Eleven croaked as she turned her head and stared up at him in awe, and he’d smiled. Her eyes were still the same, big and brown and beautiful.

“Yeah, El, it’s Mike. You’re home, you’re safe.” He’d promised.

“No,” She’d shaken her head, and he’d given a more insistent nod.

“Yeah, you’re okay now!” He assured, and Lucas and Dustin had chimed in.

“You’re back home, El, we’re going to protect you.” Lucas tells her, and Dustin clapped him on the shoulder.

“That’s what friends do, remember?” He asks with a toothless grin, she nods solemnly and clears her throat.

“Friends protect friends,” She says softly, and then frowns as if taxed by something. Mike is pretty quiet, just soaking in Eleven’s presence, but Dustin and Lucas are quick to fill the girl in. He slips away to hug Jonathan in thanks as his friends help the girl to her feet, and then pulls Will to the front, to introduce them. She’s propped up between Lucas and Dustin, but mostly standing on her own two feet now.

“El, this is Will. Will, this is Eleven.” He says as they stand across from each other, Will takes in her appearance with enraptured eyes and then holds out his hand hesitantly. Her hand seems to be sticky and gross, but Will doesn’t really falter at that. He seems a little in a daze himself, almost like he was somewhere else entirely. But when he speaks, his voice is clear and shines with excitement.

“Nice to finally meet you, El.” He nods his head; Mike watches the girl’s eyes staring at Will as if he was a foreign creature. She shakes his hand carefully and then gives a small smile.

“Hi,” She whispers, and Will smiles.

“Welcome to the team, it’s great to have a real wizard on our side.” He jokes with a chuckle, and Eleven gives him a puzzled look before Nancy passes them by with Steve assisting a haggard looking Jonathan.

“Let’s go, you guys.” Nancy insists, and they start walking once more.

It seemed like a fantasy, something he would dream, he couldn’t believe it. After months of missing her, thinking that maybe she was gone forever, Eleven was home. After getting back to the Byers’ home, Nancy had told them that El needed clothes and a bath. Jonathan was already in the shower, so she’d decided to take them all back to the Wheeler residence in Steve’s car.

However, it seems that Will isn’t up for that, and insists that he stay home. He keeps turning his eyes to the hallway, where

his brother had disappeared down.

"C'mon, man, don't you want to get to know El?" Dustin urges, and Will sighs as he shifts awkwardly and glances over to where Nancy is placing her jacket over Eleven's shoulders.

"Of course I do, I just have to be here for Jonathan." He explains quietly, and Mike frowns at him.

"Jonathan's fine, dude." He promises, and Will shakes his head, expression shuttering off like it did when they encroached on the topic of the Upside Down. This was something Mike didn't understand, something he didn't experience, something that few people could get. Mike was not one of those people, unfortunately, and so he nods his head. "Do what you gotta, we'll talk tomorrow." He gives the boy a gentle hug and then turns back to where Nancy and Eleven are standing.

"See you guys," Will waves at them from the doorway, Mike notices that Steve doesn't follow them. Nancy has the keys and gets in the driver's seat, taking a moment to buckle up and turn the key in the ignition.

"Why isn't Steve coming?" Mike questions with a squint of his eyes. Something had been up with Steve and Nancy lately, and it centered around Jonathan for some reason.

"Because he wants to make sure Jonathan's okay," Nancy says simply, and Mike offers a glance to Dustin, who's sitting on the other side of Eleven. Eleven is obviously lost on the topic, but Dustin

looks a little unconvinced.

"Gee, after the stuff that's been going on lately, you'd think he was Jonathan's boyfriend, not yours." Dustin says teasingly, Lucas and Mike laugh, but Nancy simple kicks the car into reverse and starts pulling out without a word.

"Nancy?" Mike mutters, and Nancy meets his eyes as she twists by the waist to back out. Her expression isn't pain filled, or sad, just a little hesitant. As if there was a secret she was keeping that was on the tip of her tongue, about to spill despite her caution.

"Steve and I aren't dating anymore," She tells him, and her voice holds the weight of something else that makes them all fall quiet. They weren't stupid, they could see the signs, and the way Steve had taken a sudden interest in Jonathan. He'd been in shambles worrying about him it seemed, but Mike had been too caught up in Eleven to really think about it too much.

"Steve's a queer?" Dustin asks after a moment in disbelief, and Lucas leans on the arm of the seat to look back at them with a grin.

"I knew it, man, I knew something wasn't right!" He points at Dustin with a laugh.

"Queer?" Eleven asks tiredly, and Mike wraps an arm around her shoulder.

“It’s a word for a boy who like likes another boy.” He explains, and Eleven frowns and purses her lips. Her face seems paler, and she was still shivering from the cold.

“Is it bad?” She murmurs, looking at Mike in confusion. He opens his mouth, and when he looks to Lucas and Dustin, they seem just as at a loss for words. Nancy sighs as she turns down onto a different street, shaking her head.

“There isn’t anything wrong with it, El. People are stupid.” She says with conviction, and when Eleven looks to Mike in befuddlement, he nods.

“Sometimes you just like what you like, I guess.” He tells her quietly, and he takes her clammy cold hand into his own, she squeezes it lightly. Eleven’s head droops down onto his shoulder with a soft sigh, and he feels at ease to have her home again. They might have the FBI on their tail, or whatever bad men that might know about her, but she was with him and that was all that mattered.

-

After a while of watching a simple romantic comedy (Steve suspected it wasn’t Jonathan or Will’s, but a movie their mother enjoyed, but he could have been wrong.), Jonathan stops shivering and Will starts snoring. But Steve notes that Jonathan is awake, he’s just not moving from his position against Steve and is instead still breathing quietly.

When the credits roll, Jonathan turns his head in the

slightest and buries his face a little closer to Steve's neck. A shiver runs up Steve's spine and he barely suppresses the noise that accompanies it, he squeezes Jonathan's shoulder gently.

"Steve?" Jonathan whispers, and Steve feels like he's stepped on a boundary. They had a tendency to dance around one another lately, and he hoped that this could continue without incident. He hums in reply, putting some slack in his hold and sighing against Jonathan's hair. The young man sits up slowly, looking tired and a little thoughtful.

"You should probably get to bed," Steve comments, in an attempt to keep Jonathan from confronting him about everything that had been going on. Jonathan rubs at one of his eyes with a small yawn, and then turns his gaze fully to Steve.

"Don't know if I can after that," He admits honestly, voice soft and arm still slumped around his brother's limp form. He was about to fall into Jonathan's lap, mouth hanging open slightly and hair sticking up in the slightest. They're quiet for a bit; Steve looks away and runs a hand through his hair.

"Yeah, well. Little man is down for the count, want me to get him?" He questions, standing up and allowing the blankets to fall off of him. He holds out his arms in a gesture and Jonathan stares up at him for an intense few seconds before nodding. Steve picks the boy up without much effort, carrying him out of the living room and into his room. He takes the boy's shoes off and tucks him under the covers, ruffling his already messy hair when he mumbles something in his sleep and turns over.

When he stands up and turns to leave, Jonathan is

standing in the doorway with a blanket around his shoulders. His hair is a bit messy on the side, where it was pressed against Steve's neck; he can still feel the warmth of it on his shoulder.

"Nancy said she's coming back," Jonathan mutters, and Steve nods as he approaches. "Maybe we should wait for her?" Steve steps a little closer into Jonathan's space, the boy doesn't step back, just stares up at him with furrowed eyebrows and intense eyes.

"We could just wait in my room for a while," He offers quietly, and Steve clears his throat a little when Jonathan's eyes flicker down to Steve's lips for a split second. "I might fall asleep after a while, but I'm not really up for being alone right now." He confesses in a murmur.

"Jonathan?" Steve's voice is barely audible, and Jonathan's eyebrows do a funny thing as his eyes scan Steve's face. Steve places his hands on the door frame, balancing himself as he leans into Jonathan's space.

"What?" Jonathan mumbles, Steve tips his head forward then. For just a moment, he's about to kiss Jonathan Byers, and then the front door opens. Jonathan steps back, Steve mimics him and they both seem to flush with color. The awkwardness had begun, had Jonathan wanted Steve to kiss him? Did Jonathan think he was weird now? Why was trying to make a move so hard when he'd been doing it for years?

"Boys, I'm home!" It was Joyce, Steve thinks with bitterness, what amazing timing.

“Hey mom,” Jonathan turns and heads down the hallway, Steve follows behind carefully. He feels exposed, like his intents were out in the open for everyone to see, especially Joyce. “How was your date?” He asks casually as the woman sets her purse down on the coffee table.

“Date? What date?” Joyce asks as she shrugs out of her coat, Jonathan throws a smirk back at Steve and then snorts.

“With Hopper, of course.” He grins, and Joyce shoots him a look before it falters and she sighs.

“What happened to your face, honey?” She asks, and Steve glances at the scab on his forehead and the bruise on his cheek. It was obvious that this wasn’t something to be shocked at for Joyce, and he wondered how many times Jonathan had come home beat to hell by the kids at their school... He wondered how many times it was from Tommy and Steve. “Are those boys picking on you again?” She asks, and he shrugs her off.

“It’s fine, mom, I handled it.” He assures, crossing his arms. “So the date was good, then?” She seems to be hesitant to move onwards, and they have a stare off for a moment.

“It was nice, okay?” She confesses, and Jonathan’s smile softens.

“I’m glad you’re happy, mom.” He tells her sincerely, Steve feels like he’s trespassing on an intimate moment. But then Joyce spots him as she straightens out from digging in her purse, smiling at

him.

"Oh, hello, Steve." She greets quietly, he nods and waves.

"Hey, Ms. B." He replies shakily, she observes the boys for a moment and Steve knows that the jig is up. She knew, somehow, with her freaky mom powers.

"What'd you boys do today? Other than get into a fight, of course…" She questions, Steve shrugs and looks to Jonathan with an urgent expression. Jonathan stares at him for a moment, then sighs, running a hand through his hair.

"We have a lot to tell you; actually, you might want to sit down." Jonathan explains gently, Joyce's eyes narrow slightly and she sinks down to sit on the edge of the coffee table.

"Jonathan, if you and Steve are together, then that's completely okay with me." Joyce says suddenly, Jonathan makes a choking noise and Steve's mouth goes dry. He sort of wants to leap out of the window, or perhaps the closest ten story building.

"W-Wha- mom, no!" Jonathan squeaks, Steve ducks his head, unable to make eye contact with the older woman anymore. Steve isn't sure whether to feel relieved or hurt by his answer. "Eleven is back," He cuts to the chase, and Joyce leaps to her feet.

"What? Where is she, she's alive?" Joyce demands,

Jonathan holds out his hands in a calming gesture. Joyce takes a step forward, eyes wild as she glances past Jonathan's shoulder. "Where's Will, is everyone all right?" She asks frantically.

"Everyone's fine, mom… I took care of it; Will's asleep in his room." He assures, and Joyce's eyebrows do a funny thing before dipping down and furrowing together.

"Took care of it, you took care of it without calling me?" She asks, tone disapproving and scolding, and Jonathan sighs.

"We didn't want to scare you, Will was talking to Eleven in the Upside Down and I kept hearing her voice." He scrambles to explain, Joyce's eyes soften. "I thought I was going crazy, mom. But then things started happening, and I couldn't leave her there." He whispers, Joyce pulls her son into a hug and sighs against his shoulder.

"You're too goodhearted for this place, sweetheart." She says honestly, running her fingers through his hair as she pulls back in the slightest. "Tell me what happened, tell me all of it." She instructs, and then looks to Steve.

"Steve and Nancy believed me, Steve's barely left my side." He swears, and Joyce smiles softly and grabs Steve to pull him into a hug. He's shocked for a moment, but he hugs the small woman back gently as Jonathan smiles at him.

"Thank you, Steve." When the woman leans away, Steve nods.

“Of course, Jonathan’s my best friend, that’s what I’m here for.” He assures, and Joyce’s eye glints with a certain knowing look. She knew his intentions in that moment, and the smile that followed reassured him that it wouldn’t be such a bad thing in her eyes. His stomach twists a little at the thought of his own mother, who wouldn’t nearly as accepting.

“I want to know it all, so you’re going to sit here and tell me.” She pulls them both to the couch, and Steve looks to Jonathan for a place to start. Jonathan frowns for a moment, before sighing quietly.

“It all started a few months ago, when I started hearing things.” He begins.

-

Nancy and Mike’s parents are home when they get there, and their mother demands answers when they step inside accompanied by a dirty little girl. Of course Joyce had explained some of what had happened to Karen, but not everything.

Surprisingly though, she doesn’t ask about the house, and Nancy notes that everything is back into place. As if the people that had broken in and trashed the place had cleaned up shortly after and left, this was unsettling all on its own. The boys seem to notice this as well, and they all look to Nancy with unease. Nancy takes in a deep breath and nudges Mike, nodding to Eleven in a silent urging.

“Mom, this is El.” Mike introduces quietly, and there’s a dawning of realization on their mother’s face as she nods. She knew how depressed Mike had been right after Eleven had disappeared, the boy was practically crushed over it.

“Oh okay, well… It looks like she could use some cleaning up, Nancy do you need any help?” She questions carefully, and Nancy nods.

“Could you find some of my old clothes for her? I’m gonna help her take a bath.” She explains, Eleven turns her head to look at Nancy with trepidation.

“Bath?” She asks nervously, and Nancy places a hand on her sticky, shivering shoulder. She had experienced so much fear and cruelty in her life, Nancy wanted more than anything to protect her. It seemed as if Jonathan felt the same way from earlier events, a need to protect a little girl, most likely because he saw his brother in her.

“Not that kind of bath, a nice bath.” She assures, and Eleven frowns to Mike, who nods.

“With bubbles and stuff, it’s not like your baths.” He promises her, she nods, seeming a little relieved.

“Right, I’ll go look for that.” Karen promises, heading upstairs as the boys shift around and look to Nancy for directions. Other than Jonathan, she was the brains of the operation. In fact, it could be said that Jonathan’s blatant recklessness could crown her the main leader, he just happened to get lucky with his actions.

Nancy was the one with the plans; Nancy was the one at the top because of her levelheadedness.

"You guys go downstairs and wait for us. I don't want Eleven sleeping here tonight, they're probably watching the house." Mike starts to protest, but Nancy shoots him a glare that silences him. "I'm bringing her back to the Byers' for the night; I wasn't kidding when I said the adults should handle this. Ms. Byers and Hopper will figure this out; we can't do it all alone." She explains and the boy nods grudgingly.

"Okay, let's go." He turns on his heel and they head through the kitchen towards the basement. Eleven watches them go nervously, and Nancy places her hand back on the girl's shoulder tentatively.

"C'mon, El, let's get you cleaned up."

-

"Did it get you?" Joyce demands when Jonathan mentions the encounter with the monster. He can feel the heat from the wound on his shoulder, and he opens his mouth to assure her that he's fine, but he changes his mind at the sight of his mother's stern look. He remembers her voice the year before when she'd found out he was sneaking around.

"You act like you're all alone out there in the world, but you're not! You're not alone!"

“Just a little,” He can feel Steve’s gaze fall on him with worry, so he carefully pulls at the back of his shirt collar to lift it up over his head. There are a few bruises forming on him, but the gauze on his collar bone is what stands out obviously. He’d dressed the wound earlier, afraid of it getting infected.

“Jonny!” Steve’s voice holds scorn for keeping it from him; Jonathan rolls his eyes as his mother switches over to sit next to him on the couch. She pries the tape off of one corner and peels away part of the gauze, gasping softly.

“Jonathan, this is awful.” She whispers, Jonathan shrugs her hand off and replaces the bandage with a sigh.

“It’s fine, okay? It barely hurts.” He assures honestly, and his mother stares at him a moment before leaning over and kissing his cheek.

“So what happened next?” She urges impatiently.

-

It had taken a few minutes to get Eleven into the bathtub, but she seemed to enjoy it to an extent once she realized it wasn’t a bad thing. Nancy’s mother had found some old clothes of Nancy’s and they were currently sitting on the sink for after Eleven gets out.

Her hair has gotten longer since Nancy had last seen the girl, a little curly and a bit of a mop on the top of her head. She combs out lump after lump of filth, and Eleven sits patiently and plays with the bubbles with a soft smile on her face.

"You like baths now, El?" She asks with a smirk, the girl nods her head.

"Bubbles." She states simply with a smile, and Nancy laughs quietly.

"Bubbles indeed." She agrees.

"Nancy?" Eleven whispers after a moment, she had stopped suddenly in her play and fallen quiet. Nancy hums at her as she works a large knot from the girl's hair. "Trouble." She says, and Nancy pauses to lean over and look at her in concern.

"What do you mean?" She asks, and Eleven shakes her head.

"Will, bad things…" She says quietly, Nancy's stomach rolls uneasily.

"What's wrong with Will?" She questions, and Eleven shrugs in response.

“Jonathan too… Bad trouble…” She nods her head, brown eyes wide and a little fearful. Nancy knew the girl was short with vocabulary, but experiencing it firsthand made her wonder what exactly she’d gone through in her life. Mike had to teach her what friends were, it was a horrific idea to think that she was so abused that she never learned basic things.

“What kind of trouble?” Nancy presses; she felt an urgency to call the Byers residence just to make sure there wasn’t some sort of hellish showdown going on. But at the same time, if there wasn’t, she didn’t want to freak anyone out. Eleven doesn’t seem to have any of the answers, which is really odd and possibly even more unsettling.

“It’s coming,” She whispers, and Nancy sighs before covering Eleven’s eyes gently and washing the shampoo from her hair. They’d deal with it all soon, she was sure of that.

-

“Well it’s getting late, I’m sure your parents are expecting you home, Steve.” Joyce says hesitantly, and Steve shakes his head. They had talked through the details of everything that had happened, and Joyce had promised to inform Hopper the next morning.

“They’re out of town for a while,” He explains, glancing over to Jonathan. “But if you guys want me to go, I can.” He assures.

“No, no, of course not. I just didn’t want you to get in trouble.” Joyce tells him hurriedly, and Jonathan bites his lip anxiously.

“Nancy’s coming back with Eleven, mom. She’s going to stay here the night if that’s okay,” He says quietly, Joyce nods her head, taking everything in stride. That seemed to be the best thing about her, she just ran with everything thrown at her. It was a nice trait to have, and it seemed like Jonathan had inherited it from her.

“Of course, yes. We can put her on the couch for tonight; I’ll call Jim in the morning.” She agrees, standing up suddenly. “I’ll fix something up, don’t worry about it.” Jonathan and Steve get to their feet a little slower, glancing to each other awkwardly.

“Think you’ll be okay tonight?” The older boy questions, crossing his arms, Jonathan ducks his head and sighs.

“It was in my room,” He mutters after a pause of quiet between them, he can hear Joyce rooting through something somewhere down the hall. “In the Upside Down, its nest was in my room.” He looks over at Steve, dark brown eyes tired and nervous.

“Ms. Byers!” Steve calls, earning a hum of a noise in reply from the woman somewhere in the house. “Do you mind if I stay the night tonight?” He asks, Joyce returns to the room with blankets and pillows stacked in her arms.

“Yes, of course, Steve. Just remember that school is tomorrow.” She smiles distractedly and sets the blankets down on the table before she turns on her heel to disappear back down the hallway. Steve turns back to Jonathan to find the shorter boy staring at him in slight awe; Steve thumps him on the back and sighs.

“I’m not sleeping on the floor; I call the side closest to the door.” He walks past Jonathan and into the hallway, shaking off his unease from the sudden knowledge he’d gained. The big bad murder monster had made its home in Jonathan’s room. To be honest, Steve didn’t really want him sleeping there alone anymore at all.

There’s a knock on the front door that is most likely Nancy with Eleven as Steve surveys Jonathan’s room from the doorway, it was the same dirty mess it was earlier. He clears his throat and glares at the lamp sitting on the desk across the room, taking in a deep breath.

“If you drop down from the ceiling, I will not hesitate to beat the shit out of you.” He whispers into the quiet, propping his hands on his hips. “And that’s a promise.” He huffs.

“You talking to yourself, Harrington?” He jumps at the voice from behind, stepping hurriedly out of the way so that Jonathan can get in the door.

“What? You hearing things again, Byers?” He teases with a scoff, Jonathan smirks a little as he starts to kick his clothes aside. “I meant what I said earlier, you know.” When the other teen offers him a puzzled look, he smirks. “I get the side closest to the door.” He steps over to the mattress and flings himself back onto it; he notes that the bed doesn’t even have a frame.

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” Jonathan shoves Steve’s leg out of the way in his attempt to clean up a little; Steve pushes his hip with his foot playfully and earns a glare without any real heat. The young

man picks up some more clothes and throws them into a messy pile near his closet.

"Hey guys," Nancy is suddenly at the door, smiling at them both. "I miss anything?" She questions, Steve sits up just as Jonathan sinks down onto the mattress next to him.

"Other than the entire cast of Rocky Horror Picture Show breaking down outside of the house an hour ago? Nah." He jokes; Nancy rolls her eyes and steps over to the bed. She sits down on Steve's right, sighing tiredly. "Where's El?" He asks lazily.

"Ms. Byers is setting her up a place to sleep on the couch." Nancy replies, leaning back on her arms and staring up at the ceiling. "Steve, you giving me a ride home?" She asks, Steve snorts.

"I will, but I'm coming right back here." He admits, Nancy shoots him a confused look. "That monster thing's nest in the Upside Down is right here." He whispers, an eerie feeling creeping up his spine.

"Why is it in your room?" She leans forward to ask Jonathan, who shrugs.

"My luck, I guess." He huffs a quiet, humorless laugh.

"All right, well I'll make sure Eleven's settled in and then we can go." She says distractedly, and Steve nods his head.

“Cool,” He murmurs, and then they both watch as Nancy steps out of the room without another word. She seemed slightly off, like she was thinking intensely, and Steve wonders what was bothering her.

“You’re really broken up?” Jonathan asks after a moment, and Steve nods his head. It was weird, almost as if Nancy and he was never a thing. He wasn’t friends with any of his exes, but he got on so well with Nancy that he never wanted to let her go. Maybe she was right; maybe they were never really in love at all… But the relationship still meant something, a significant stepping stone in his life that he’d never regret. It wasn’t pointless; it just wasn’t what they’d first expected it to be.

“Yeah… Why, you want to get with her?” He questions cautiously, feeling his nerves locking up in anticipation of his answer. He turns his head a little, finding Jonathan still staring at the empty doorway. He can hear Joyce’s voice softly explaining something unintelligible to Eleven.

“No.” Jonathan startles him a little, and he turns his head back to him once more. “Nah, I’m not too interested.” His eyes scan over Steve’s face for a moment, and their knees brush against one another.

“Steve,” They both jump, Steve leaps to his feet. Nancy is standing in the door with her hip cocked against the door frame and her arms crossed. “Let’s go, slowpoke. My mom’s gonna pitch a fit if I’m not home soon.” She explains, and he nods.

“Right, yeah, okay.” He twists back towards Jonathan, who’s staring at him with a confused look on his face. “I’ll be back, okay?” He holds his hand out in a fist, and Jonathan gently reaches up to bump his own against it. He turns and heads out the door, surpassing Nancy and shoving his hands in his pockets.

Joyce tells Nancy goodnight from where she’s sitting on the couch with Eleven, she’s brushing her hair gently and Eleven is holding a cup of something in her hands. She seems pretty content, and Steve hopes that it stays that way. She was just a little girl, she deserved a normal life after all she’d been through.

“Be right back, princess.” Steve tips a hand to the girl, who ducks her head shyly as Joyce chuckles. He shuts the door behind them and heads off the porch, towards where Nancy parked his car in the driveway.

“Steve and Jonathan, sitting in a tree… K-I-S-S-I-N-G!” Nancy croons to him; he scowls and glances back at the house as he pushes her away gently. “Those were some serious heartsick eyes you were giving each other!” Nancy laughs as they get into the car; he quickly turns the key in the engine.

“Shut up! What if someone hears you?” He glances around, rolling up the windows and pulling out of the driveway.

“Oh please, like anyone doesn’t know you and Jonathan are in love.” She pokes him in the side; he smacks her hand away and jerks the wheel to the side to jostle them both. “Steve!” Nancy laughs as he swerves back and forth on the road purposefully.

“What was that, Nance??” He turns the wheel and rights himself, sighing as their laughter calms. “I was gonna kiss him earlier, but his mom came home.” Nancy gasps softly and then begins to giggle behind her hand. “It’s not funny, Nancy!” He whines.

“You have to admit, it kind of is, Steve.” She snickers, patting his shoulder.

“I’ve been out with a million girls, Nance. What the hell makes Byers any different?” He huffs, leaning back in his seat and letting his hands hang loosely on the bottom of the wheel.

“Well he’s a guy for one,” She snorts, he rolls his eyes and sighs even louder in complaint. “I don’t know, Steve! Maybe it’s because you actually started caring about him and his opinion before you asked him out.” She shrugs, and he sits up a little and frowns.

It made sense he supposed, he usually found a girl cute and he flirted with them for a bit before they dated. He’d even done that with Nancy, he never expected to care for people as much as he did about Nancy and Jonathan. Usually he really didn’t know them until after they started dating, and with Jonathan he had gotten to know him first before actually having feelings for him. In fact, they hated each other in the beginning.

“You fell in love with him, Steve. And it’s understandable, he’s a sweet guy.” Nancy tells him, running a hand through her hair. Steve glances over at her and then back to the road, hunching forward a bit.

“You interested in him, Nancy?” He asks quietly, and Nancy turns her head so fast he swears she gives herself whiplash.

“Wh- of course not!” She laughs, placing her hand on Steve’s arm comfortingly. “Steve, I’m not going to try to steal your boyfriend. Don’t get so jealous, it’s a serious character flaw.” She smirks; he sighs and nods his head.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right. Gotta work on that, but can you blame me? You’re so perfect, anybody would fall for you.” He leans over and bumps his elbow into her shoulder; she pushes him back onto his side of the car.

“Jonathan wouldn’t see me like that even if I stripped naked in front of him,” She states with a dismissive wave of her hand, Steve snorts.

“Is that something that’s taken place before?” He questions teasingly, she laughs and shakes her head.

“No, of course not. That’s your job,” She jokes, he feels his face flushing a bright red as he pulls into the Wheeler’s driveway, he leans past her and opens her door.

“Get out,” He chuckles; she presses a kiss to his cheek and slips out of the car with a smile.

“Night, Steve.” She waves at him and closes the door; he

watches her walk up the driveway and into the house before he pulls out onto the street to head back to the Byers' house.

-

When Steve returns, Eleven is tucked under some blankets and laying on the couch. Her eyes are on the TV and she seems slightly startled by Steve's return, sitting up a little.

"What's up, princess?" He smirks; she smiles gently and ducks her head. "Sweet dreams and all that, Jonny and me are gonna be just down the hallway. You get scared tonight; you come get us, yeah?" He gestures, she nods carefully and he grins. "Okay, kiddo." He passes through the living room and down the hall to Jonathan's room. He turns the knob and pushes the door open with a soft knock of his knuckles against the wood.

The lamp near the bed is on and Jonathan is lying on the far side of the mattress, his head tipped to the side slightly with headphones on and his eyes shut. Steve pauses just inside the room, his stomach twisting with something warm and fuzzy. He feels disgusted that he's let himself get so invested in this person that just the sight of him at ease made Steve's stomach flutter.

He closes the door behind him, kicking off his shoes, socks, and his jeans. He stands next to the bed for a moment, Jonathan was either asleep or hadn't noticed his presence yet. He picks at the hem of his t-shirt, unsure as to whether he should take it off or not. Jonathan was wearing a shirt, but Steve often slept shirtless because he got overheated at night.

After a moment, he decides to shrug out of his t-shirt and then places his knee on the mattress. Jonathan startles, partially sitting up and eyes opening as he takes in Steve before him. He seems to relax a little, slipping his headphones onto his neck and sighing quietly.

"You scared me," He mutters, rubbing at his eye and dropping back down onto his pillow. "You took Nancy home?" He asks, taking off his headphones and setting them on the table beside him. Steve climbs onto the bed and slides under the sheets carefully, making sure to keep a little distance between himself and Jonathan. He lies on his back with his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling.

"Yeah, El is watching TV." He smirks, Jonathan huffs a soft laugh and turns on his side to face Steve, tucking one arm under his head.

"My mom's probably going to want to adopt her," He admits quietly, and Steve hums in understanding, he could definitely see that. "Don't know if we're going to be able to, our financial situation is…" He lets his voice trail off, and Steve can hear the embarrassment in his tone. He usually avoided these conversations like the plague, and being honest with Steve meant that Jonathan trusted him.

"You'll figure it out, man. If you can't take her, someone else will. Hell, Hopper had a daughter once didn't he?" He replies easily, Jonathan grunts quietly in affirmation. "Maybe he'll take her, he can protect her." He nods.

"Yeah, I guess." The other mutters to him, Steve can feel

his eyes on the side of his face so he turns his head to look at Jonathan. “Thanks for staying over,” Jonathan says softly, and Steve nods.

“I don’t want to have to go into the Upside Down and pull you out after we just saved Eleven.” He tries for a joke, but it falls a little flat. “I’ve got your back, man.” He promises, definitely not for the first time.

“Yeah, same.” Jonathan nods his head, hair a bit of a mess where it’s crushed against his arm. “Steve, can I…” He trails off once more, as if debating the continuance of his sentence.

“Can you...?” Steve urges quietly, and Jonathan’s eyes avoid meeting anywhere near Steve’s face.

“I was just going to ask if I could turn off the light, tomorrow’s school and all that.” Jonathan amends quickly, and Steve stares at him a moment before nodding his head.

“Sure, Jonny.” He mutters, turning his eyes back to the ceiling. Jonathan shifts to turn off the lamp and then they’re sucked into the blackness, only a dim light coming from the closed curtains of the window. Steve adjusts a little in place and then turns over onto his side away from Jonathan, closing his eyes.

Tomorrow would be better.

-

Will wakes up and for a moment, everything that's happened the night before seems like a dream. For a second he squints around his dimly lit room, his night light is still on and not flickering, and the sun hasn't even come up yet. The clock near his bed reads just past three in the morning, he was surprised he hadn't woken up from a nightmare yet. He yawns and rubs at his eyes, wondering what had woken him up if not his dreams.

"Will?" He startles, noticing the small crack in the door. It takes him a moment to calm himself, recognizing the voice, he turns on his lamp.

"El?" He whispers, the light casts a glow on the girl's face. Her hair is a little messy from sleep, eyes tired but wide in anxiety. Nancy must have brought her back for the night; his mom must know everything by now. "Did you have a nightmare?" He murmurs, and the girl nods her head hesitantly.

He shifts in his bed, unsure about how he felt about the girl. He barely knew her, but they'd shared some of the same experiences he supposed. Mike loved her, the boys cared about her, in some ways Will did too.

"Bad things, trouble." She tells him vaguely, and he nods in slight understanding.

"You can sleep with me if you want," He offers quietly, she slips into the room carefully, like she might be yelled at for simply

existing. “Close the door behind you, please.” He instructs, the girl nods and closes the door before stepping over to the bed. Will pulls down his blankets and pats the mattress; the girl pulls a knee onto the bed and climbs on next to him.

He takes his pillow and adjusts it so they can both lay their heads down, both on their sides and facing one another. Settled beside Eleven he realized how safe he felt, like when he was with Jonathan or his mom. He felt like he wanted to keep her safe, like he wanted to protect her… But at the same time he knew that she would be the one to protect him somehow.

“G’night El, sweet dreams.” He whispers, he can see her eyes glinting in the dark.

“Sweet dreams,” She mimics, almost puzzled, but accepting of the term. He smiles and closes his eyes, adjusting the blankets further over them. They’d get a little more sleep, the girl probably needed it.

-

Steve slowly arises from sleep, at first not very sure of where he was. The air smelled different and it was dark in the room, but there was a warm body tucked against his chest and it took him a moment to sober up and remember that he’d spent the night at the Byers’ house. He could hear a door squeaking open, and figured it was Eleven most likely. She’d find them if she needed them, but by the muffled voices coming from across the hall, he knew she’d be okay with Will.

He adjusts his arms a little and Jonathan shifts against him, his arm goes from on Steve's hip to hanging over his waist and his leg fits itself between Steve's. The guy was a cuddle monster, who would have thought?

But Jonathan was asleep and therefor Steve had even less self-control when he tips his head down and takes in a deep breath of Jonathan's hair. Yes, he knows it's creepy, but the boy's hair is soft from being freshly washed and it smells like some cheap shampoo and he loves it. He kisses Jonathan's head and wraps his arm firmly around his shoulders, closing his eyes once more. They could sleep for a bit longer.

-

Jonathan dreams of being chased through the Upside Down by the creature, the trees never ending and the monster slowly gaining on him. He had veered off to the side suddenly and ran right into a rickety old house, and as he was trying to find a place to hide, he had stumbled upon Steve. They had hidden together in an old closet, crouched low and sides pressed together, the only warmth he could feel.

When he wakes up, he's rather warm, but too much so that he was uncomfortable. There's a body against his that he quickly recalls is Steve without even having to open his eyes. He breathes out a soft sigh and buries his face further into Steve's neck, squinting tired eyes open.

His heart stutters and skips a beat at the sight of the figure standing near the door. At first it's just the sight of the person, and then he realizes it's his father, and his anxiety worsens. Who let him

in? Why was he here? What was he going to do?

"I always knew you were a queer," Lonnie mutters with disdain, expression hard and hands on his hips. Jonathan really isn't sure what to do for a moment, and then he leans back from Steve. The older boy makes a displeased noise and clutches at the side of his shirt; Jonathan grips his hand to stop him.

"Steve," He whispers, Lonnie's swaying in place, Jonathan's breaths quickening as the man steps over to the mattress.

"What, Jonny? Go back to bed." Steve turns his head against the pillow with a sleepy groan, and Jonathan doesn't have time to even shout a warning before Lonnie grabs Steve's arm and yanks him off the bed. Steve makes a startled yelp as he hits the floor, and Jonathan leaps off the bed. "What the hell?" Steve murmurs, sitting up. Jonathan glances down to him for a moment; his eyes are wide and confused.

"I tried to fix you; I tried so hard to make you a man." Lonnie points a finger at Jonathan, who scowls silently. "From a little boy, I knew you'd be queer if you didn't get some tough love. Your mama shouldn't have left me, and then we wouldn't have this problem!" He snaps, waving his arm about.

"Please, tell me about how beating the shit out of your kids is going to make them straight." He huffs, his voice shakes with anger and anxiety as he approaches Lonnie. He hated conflict, his father was the worst to argue with, and he'd never really done it much as a child for many reasons.

“You’re the only man in the house, what sort of example to your brother is this?” Lonnie demands, Jonathan clenches his jaw and tightens his hands into fists. Lonnie couldn’t judge him; Lonnie was nothing but a piece of trash that just so happened to donate half of Jonathan’s DNA.

“I’m a better father than you could ever hope to be.” He says without hesitating, trying not to flinch when Lonnie predictably grabs him by his shirt and hauls him close.

“Jonny,” Steve’s standing off to the side, nervous and unsure. His father was just as much of an ass as Jonathan’s, just with different ways of controlling their children. He wouldn’t get involved; the entire situation seemed to make him anxious. Steve didn’t have to interfere though; Jonathan would take care of this.

“I’m your father, I deserve respect.” He snarls, voice low and gravelly, his breath reeks of alcohol. Jonathan looks him in the eyes, he didn’t look much like his father but he the slight resemblance was enough to disgust him.

“You’re no father; you’re a coward who likes to take his anger out on people less than half your size.” He shoves Lonnie away with a movement of his arms that forces his hands to release Jonathan’s shirt. “Get out of here, you don’t live here anymore.” He points to the door, Lonnie shakes his head.

“I don’t want Will around a faggot like you,” It snaps something in Jonathan, and he surges forward and shoves the man out of the door. He thuds against the wall, knocks a picture down, Jonathan stands in the doorway with his hands at his sides and his head held high.

“This faggot has done more for this family than you ever did.” He grabs his father by his jacket collar and pulls him forcefully down the hall before he can gain his wits. He can hear the door to Will’s room opening; Jonathan shoves Lonnie into the living room. “Get out,” He points to the door; Lonnie’s eyes are blazing with anger.

“Does your mother know about this? Does she know you’re sleeping around with queers?” He sneers; Jonathan scoffs a disbelieving laugh and runs his hand through his hair.

“You haven’t even come around on my birthday half the time, why do you care what I do?” He demands, Lonnie rolls his eyes and flexes his hands, glancing around.

“You’re my son, I should have a say in your life.” He argues, Jonathan laughs for real this time. He can remember being shoved away by his face when he tried to talk during the ball game on TV, being sent to his room for simply bothering Lonnie. The man didn’t give a crap about him, he never did.

“You don’t get a say in anything, you gave that up years ago.” He pokes a finger against Lonnie’s chest, then plants his entire hand on his father’s sternum and pushes him once again. “Get out,” He insists firmly.

“Jonathan?” Will calls hesitantly from the hall doorway, Jonathan glances back at the boy as he comes to stand at the edge of the hall.

“Go back to bed, Will, it-“ He grunts as he’s shoved hard, his back hitting the corner of the table next to the couch and knocking the air from his lungs.

“Leave him alone!” Jonathan looks up as his baby brother- a small little thing who often seemed like a strong gust of wind could knock him down- storms up to his father and starts shoving at him. “I don’t want to see you anymore! Get out!” He demands with a shout, he smacks a hand against his father’s chest as Jonathan rises to his feet. “I hate you, you bastard!”

Jonathan flinches as Lonnie’s hand comes down and slaps his youngest in the face, knocking him to the floor and bringing back way too many memories of Jonathan’s that he never wanted to relive. He’d been on the receiving end of that hand many a times, and the thought of Will having to experience it made his blood boil.

“You ungrateful little brat!” Lonnie shouts, Jonathan grabs him before he can make another move. He swings his arm and delivers a hard right hook to the man’s face; Lonnie stumbles back against the wall and falls on his ass.

Nobody laid hands on his little brother, not without dealing with Jonathan.

“Jonathan?! Will?!” That was Joyce’s voice; he glances to the screen door as his mother hurries inside. Her eyes are wide as she observes the scene; Jonathan turns to his brother and crouches down in front of him. “What happened?” Joyce demands, doesn’t sound like she’s talking to Jonathan though. The teen tugs his brother into a

hug, the boy hiccupping into his shoulder and clutching tightly to him.

-

Joyce had woken up early to fetch some clothes from a friend of hers whose daughter was just a little older than Eleven. By the time she's heading home, she has a box full of a few shirts, pants, socks and even two pairs of shoes for the girl. She never had anyone to rely on before, and Joyce wanted to be one of those people to her.

She had always wanted a daughter, although she wouldn't trade her boys for anything in the world. Of course she wanted to adopt Eleven (Eleven, what sort of name was that anyway? Mike and the boys called her El for short, but it fit her better than some number) but she knew their situation was already complicated. Maybe someone in town could take her, someone nearby.

She notes that there's an out of place white van parked on the side of the road a few houses down, and knows for a fact that their privacy bubble has been officially compromised. She wondered why they hadn't come to confiscate Eleven already, they must have known that she was at their house. They needed to move the girl soon, but where to? She'd have to call Hopper, he had some standing with the men involved in this situation, maybe he could hold them off… But what if he just handed her over to them? Was he capable of such cruelness?

When she pulls into the driveway, she notes that Steve's car is still parked there. However, she quickly notices a familiar vehicle behind Steve's, and she feels her irritation start to grow. She gets out of the car and as soon as her foot touches the pavement, she

hears shouting coming from inside the house.

She races up onto the porch at the sound of Will's voice shouting, calling for her boys as she pulls the screen door open. She takes in the scene before her, her ex-husband sitting against the wall, her eldest glaring down at him and her youngest slumped on the floor crying. She turns to her husband, knowing immediately that he was the cause of this, as always.

"What happened?" She props her hands on her hips and places herself between the boys and Lonnie as he rises to his feet. She had promised a few years ago that she'd never back down against him; she'd never be lenient with the man that would harm her children without guilt.

"Did you know that boy was here? Sleeping in Jon's bed?" Lonnie asks angrily, Joyce makes a soft scoff of a noise. "Joycie, this ain't funny. That boy is a queer and no doubt, without me here, Will's gonna be too!" He hisses.

"So what if he is? And so what if Will is? As long as they're safe and happy, I'm happy. And they sure as hell aren't safe and happy with you here, so just leave!" Joyce's voice rises near the end, tone heeding no argument.

"Fine, raise a couple of screw ups. But I won't have any part of it," Jonathan turns his head to watch Lonnie storm out of the house, the screen door slamming against the siding of the house as he flings it open. It swings back with an even louder noise, and then there's only the sound of Will's soft crying.

Joyce turns to take in her boys' current state, Jonathan sitting on the floor with Will basically clinging to him in his lap. Jonathan seems largely unharmed, and if something was seriously wrong with Will, he would have pointed it out by now.

"I kept telling him to leave," Jonathan offers, voice shaking in the slightest and eyes shining with tears. "Will jumped in and got hit, I'm sorry, mom." He whispers, already seeming to take fault and guilt from the situation, Joyce sinks down onto her knees and pulls both of her boys close. She hugs them for a few moments before pulling back to observe Will's tear-shiny face and bright red cheek.

"This is not your fault," She insists to Jonathan, who for years had taken everything onto his shoulders without reason. "You okay, honey?" She asks quietly to her youngest, Will nods his head and wipes at his face messily with a palm. He sniffles and then sits back, one hand resting on Jonathan's leg.

"He doesn't belong here, he doesn't love us." Will says softly, it didn't seem to be a statement towards either of them but rather reassuring himself. Joyce hated that her boys had to deal with such a detriment in their lives, disliking their father or even hating him in Jonathan's case. She'd never defend Lonnie, and tell them to give him a chance, she'd let them decide on their own what they wanted to think of them. They had made their choice it seemed, and it seemed like another milestone in their lives.

"Where's Eleven and Steve?" Joyce asks suddenly, and Jonathan makes a face before standing up and heading down the hall.

“Steve?” Jonathan calls as he leans into his own room, he turns around and heads to Will’s room when Steve calls back to him. Joyce and Will follow him, finding Steve and Eleven sitting on Will’s bed. The girl’s hands are over her ears, she’s leaned against Steve’s side and he’s got an arm around her.

“She didn’t like the yelling,” He stands up, ruffling the little girl’s hair distractedly before stepping forward and observing Jonathan with far too much worry and concern for a simple friend to have. “I-Is everything okay?” He glances from Jonathan’s face to Joyce’s and then Will’s. “I’m sorry I didn’t help, I just… I didn’t want to interfere in family matters…” The words ‘family matters’ seems to be a foreign term to him, and he shifts awkwardly on his feet.

It was obvious that Steve cared for Jonathan, and this morning’s situation had formed from something Steve was a part of. He keeps hesitantly looking at Joyce, as if expecting something to happen. The boy had absent parents and when they were around, they were breathing down his neck. Of course he wasn’t going to get in between Jonathan and Lonnie; father figures were intimidating in his eyes.

“He’s gone now, no worries.” Jonathan assures as Will steps past them and climbs onto the bed with Eleven. The girl smiles gently at him and pulls him into a hug; he grins into her shoulder and hugs her back.

“Mouthbreather,” She states with distaste, and Jonathan snorts as Will laughs softly.

“School starts in half an hour,” Joyce says after a moment, Jonathan makes a grunt of protest and runs his hand through his

hair. Will leans back from Eleven and frowns a little in thought.

"What's Eleven going to do while we're gone?" The boy questions, and Joyce sighs.

"I'm going to call Hopper and he's going to watch her for a while," She explains, Will makes a displeased noise and Eleven glances from him to Joyce. She seems hesitant and unsure, hands fidgeting in her lap.

"Friend?" She asks quietly, and Will nods.

"Yeah, you could say he's a friend. He's a cop, he'll protect you, and he's kinda funny too." The boy explains to her, she seems a little more reassured at that. "Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and I are going to school. When we get out, we'll come see you, okay?" He asks, she smiles and holds her wrist out, which has a little watch on it.

"Big hand here and little hand here." She points out to Will, who smiles brightly as he watches her show him.

"Yeah, that's just after school. We'll come find you after, okay?" He tells her, she nods her head.

"Jonathan?" Eleven looks to Jonathan, who frowns a little. "Come too?" She reiterates, and he shifts awkwardly as he glances over to Steve, who shrugs.

“I’ve got work today, El.” The statement itself makes Joyce’s stomach turn with guilt, she hated that her baby boy had such obligations just to help her out. He’d been working for almost three years now, even taking extra shifts on the weekends and working overtime. Between the two of them, they scraped enough money together to keep things running. It had been touch and go for a while after Will had returned; hospital bills mixed with Joyce’s advance in payment had put a strain on their financial situation.

Eleven’s face seems a little disappointed, but she seems to shrug it off a little before looking back to Will. It was nice to see her getting along with everyone, and she knew in her heart that the girl would fit right in with her family without trouble at all.

“All right, I don’t want any of you to be late!” Joyce says, breaking up the moment. She gestures to El and leads her out into the hallway, she would let the girl try on some clothes and then she’d go and talk to Hopper. “I want everyone out of the house in twenty minutes!”

-

Mike rides to school the next day, eager to hear from Will about how Eleven is doing. He was super pissed that she couldn’t stay at his house, but they already had been ransacked so he supposed it was safer away from there. He couldn’t really sleep much the night before, every bump and creak was a possible man coming into the house to assassinate him. He’d gotten up into the top bunk and pulled the covers over his head, left his flashlight on and eventually fell into a restless sleep.

Despite his exhaustion, he'd gotten up quickly in anticipation of the day. Eleven was home, and she was safe, and he could talk to her this afternoon he hoped. When he rides up to the school, he immediately spots Will coasting down the road towards the bike rack near the front of the building.

"Will!" Mike speeds up, swerving around a few people and leaping off of his bike to lead it towards the rack. Will turns his head as he slips off of his bike, smiling brightly at his friend. He still feels excited seeing Will in general, just knowing he was safe and alive. The year before he was sure that Will was gone and dead, that he'd never see his best friend again, but that wasn't true.

"Hey, Mike!" Will greets as he approaches, already chaining his bike up.

"How's El, did she sleep okay?" He questions, Will shrugs and his expression falters in the slightest. "What's wrong?" He asks, concern filling him, was Eleven okay?

"El's okay, she came to my room last night because she was scared." Mike feels a red hot prod of jealousy stick into his chest, did Will like Eleven? "But this morning…" Will's voice trailed off, and Mike's frown deepens.

"What? What happened?" Mike asks worriedly, and Will offers him a one shouldered shrug. He had that distant look in his eyes, before it meant he was worried about something, but nowadays it could also mean that he was thinking about his memories of the Upside Down.

“M-My dad showed up, he found Jonathan and Steve sleeping in the same bed together.” He admits hesitantly, Mike’s eyes widen and he looks around before grabbing his best friend’s arm and leading him inside. They walk through the empty halls and towards the AV room, and once the door is shut and locked, Mike turns to his best friend.

“What did he do?” He asks quietly, unsure. Mike had heard all sorts of awful things about Lonnie Byers, he always let Will down and crushed a lot of his hope. Jonathan obviously disliked him far more than anybody else, could barely stand to be around him. Nancy told him once that Lonnie was probably even meaner in private, which scared Mike to the core.

“He was shouting, calling Jonathan a queer and… Jonathan forced him into the living room and my dad pushed him really hard. He hit a table and I got mad, so I told him to leave, I told him I hated him.” He whispers quietly, tears in his eyes, Mike is shocked silent. Will was quiet and subdued on most occasions; to stand up to his father and to be so blunt with him was almost out of character. But at the same time it was understandable, oftentimes he knew that Will would do anything for Jonathan, and vice versa.

“W-What’d he do?” Mike questions, Will shakes his head and a tear slips down his cheek as he sniffles.

“He-He slapped me and Jonathan pun-punched him in the face.” He tells Mike brokenly, wiping at his face and ducking his head in the slightest. Mike was floored, just the idea of that fight made his head spin. He pulls Will into his arms and hugs him tight; the boy clings to him for a few moments before they separate. Then,

something occurs to him, and he frowns.

"Where was El?" He asks, Will seems to compose himself then.

"She stayed in my room with Steve, she didn't like the yelling." He murmurs, and Mike is filled with relief at the news. He didn't want Eleven involved with situations like that, especially with her powers, who knows what she might do? They had to keep her a secret, let her blend in.

"Well what's your mom gonna do with her today?" Mike hums as they turn and sit down at the table. Will grabs the sketchbook he often left in the AV room and begins to doodle.

"She's staying with Hopper while my mom works, we can ride down there this afternoon." He explains, Mike shifts in his chair excitedly. He wanted to show her everything, teach her everything, and just be with her.

"Who is she going to stay with?" He questions eagerly, Will looks up at him and smirks.

"Lucas and Dustin are right; you're in love with her!" He teases in a mocking voice; Mike's face gets hot as he scowls at his best friend. "Mike and El, sittin' in a tree, K-I-S-S-hey!" He yelps as Mike tosses a marker at him.

“Shut up!” Mike demands with a small smile, and his friend shrugs before returning to his work.

“I don’t think she’s going to stay with us, it’s not safe. Maybe with Hopper.” He offers, and Mike can’t help but quirk an eyebrow at his friend in surprise. Jim Hopper, the gruff chief of police that was wooing Will’s mom?

“Why Hopper?” He asks curiously, Will has a thoughtful look on his face for a moment.

“He used to have a daughter, you know… Maybe he’s lonely.” He says quietly, and Mike nods his head slowly. He supposed that would be okay, as long as El was happy and safe, and what was safer than the town chief?

-

Jim spends most of his days either being with Joyce or monitoring the men he worked with to make sure they didn’t set the police station on fire. They were good men; they were just a little spacey and had a tendency to goof off and cause trouble.

He mostly did paperwork and assisted some of the more senile elderly people of Hawkins when they called the police and swore that they were being stalked by squirrels. But other days he sat in his office and napped, on occasion he drew on paper or watched TV.

When his office door opens, he doesn't glance up from his papers, pencil scribbling in what could be described as chicken scratch. He figured it was Flo, who always wanted something or another, but he was busy right now.

"What do you need, I'm busy." He mutters, filling in another blank.

"Hopper," He jumps at Joyce's voice, knees banging against his desk as he throws himself back to sit up in his chair. But it's not just Joyce, no, she's got a little girl with her, a very familiar little girl. He's stunned into silence; he'd been leaving food and water for her in the woods, unsure as to where she might be. After a while, he'd begun to figure that she was gone for good and never coming back, and yet here she was.

"Eleven," He whispers in awe, the girl smiles bashfully and steps closer to Joyce. She's dressed in a slightly baggy floral t-shirt that's tucked into her jeans, her hair having grown out quite a bit. She looks like a normal girl, and he finds himself so grateful that he's safe. He feels a pang of guilt from having sold her out to the government not so long ago, but he knew that he'd never do that again.

The girl waves to him shyly and Joyce closes the door behind them before they sit down in the chairs across from him. The girl sits with her hands on the arms of the chair and her head twisting about to take in everything in the room.

"Where… How…??" Jim stammers, confused and concerned. As much as he wanted Eleven back, he knew she was in danger here as well as the place she'd gone into.

“It’s a long story, but Jonathan went into the Upside Down and found her.” Joyce admits hesitantly, and Jim’s eyes widen. That was extremely dangerous and stupid, but so brave that he really could believe it, Jonathan was a young man of honor and loyalty.

“Tell me everything,” He urges the woman, barely able to keep his eyes off of the girl.

Notes for the Chapter:

(That's all for now, my friends! I really hope you enjoyed this installment, please leave a comment below and a kudos if you did! Also, don't forget that I do have a Tumblr and I post a lot about Stonathan, so if this isn't enough Stonathan for you, check me out at bigbadlittlered on Tumblr!)

6. The Deal

Steve pulls over to the side of the road on the way to school, placing the car in park despite Jonathan's confused stare on him. He shuts the car off and rubs his thighs anxiously, mind racing with thoughts and heart rabbiting in his chest.

"W-What's wrong?" Jonathan asks hesitantly, eyebrows scrunched together in confused and mouth twisted in a confused frown.

The morning had been a bit of a stressful one, that was for certain, and Steve could usually brush these things off but this was different. He felt like they were practically ignoring a catastrophic event, Jonathan's father had caught Steve in bed with his son. Jonathan had fought with his father, had gotten into an actual physical fight.

"I'm sorry, about your dad…" He explains quietly, staring down at the steering wheel. Why didn't Jonathan hate him, why wasn't he blaming Steve?

"Why are you sorry?" Jonathan asks, turning in his seat and resting his shoulder against it, tipping his head against the headrest. Steve twists in his seat to face Jonathan, wringing his hands in his lap.

"I don't know, it was kind of my fault right? If I wasn't in bed with you…" He mutters, fidgeting in ways that were more Jonathan than himself. He was supposed to be cool and confident, but he couldn't shake the fact that Jonathan might be hiding his

anger at him. The guilt is practically flooding through him, eyes watering in the slightest.

"My dad would have found a way to yell at me if you weren't there, it's what he does." Jonathan tells him honestly, and Steve finds that he relates to the statement. His father was always criticizing him and butting heads with him, but he'd never laid a hand on Steve.

"Has he ever gotten into a fight with you like that before?" Steve questions warily, unsure as to whether or not Jonathan would mind the topic. The young man leans back against the door with a sigh, glancing out of the windshield with an odd look on his face.

"I've never really fought him before, but yeah I guess… He's slapped me around at one point or another." He admits quietly, not meeting Steve's eyes. His tone wasn't hurt or upset, more distant and cold. "I'm not afraid of him anymore; I haven't been for a few years." He murmurs, before clearing his throat. "We're gonna be late for school." He turns in his seat and stares straight ahead.

"Y-Yeah, all right." He shifts about and then twists the key in the ignition; they don't speak the rest of the way there.

-

Lucas and Dustin arrive not long after the first bell, seating themselves at the front of Mr. Clarke's class and already asking Will questions about Eleven. How was she, where was she going to stay, had anything happened at the house the night before?

“She’s staying with Hopper today while my mom works, I don’t think she’s going to stay at my house.” Will explains to them once more, Dustin makes a face as Lucas nods his head in understanding.

“Why would Hopper want Eleven? He’s kind of rocking the whole Han Solo rugged loner sort of thing.” Dustin questions, and Mike leans into the conversation.

“He used to have a daughter; besides, he can keep her safe from the bad men.” He offers with an understood ‘duh’ in his tone, which seems to quiet Dustin’s questions. They all lean back into their desks, the class had filled up and yet Mr. Clarke hadn’t arrived yet, which was odd.

“Where is he?” Dustin asks as he leans back in his seat, looking back at his friends, who all shrug. The other kids are growing louder in their talking without an adult in the room, Lucas starts to bring up an X-Men comic his father had recently gotten him right when Mr. Clarke steps through the door. Everyone falls quiet as Mr. Clarke hesitantly leans into the room and stares right at the group of boys near the front.

“Michael, Dustin, Lucas, Will… Can you come outside with your backpacks, please?” He asks, but it’s obviously not a choice of theirs. Whispers erupt through the room and the boys slowly gather their things to walk out of the room into the hallway.

“What’s going on, Mr. C?” Lucas asks worriedly as the man leads them down the hall towards the office. The man glances back at

them with a frown, eyes scanning over them as if he was trying to solve a puzzle. He scratches at his mustache and clears his throat, sticking his hands into his pockets.

"Someone wants to talk to you." He says vaguely, and then he opens the door to the office and holds it open for the boys to step inside. There are a few men standing near the counter, wearing black suits and blank expressions as their eyes fall on the boys.

"Who are you guys?" Dustin demands boldly without any formal greeting, crossing his arms and frowning.

"We'd like you to come with us," One man steps forward, he's tall and lean with a pair of black framed glasses and combed back blonde hair. "We need to speak with you about last night." The boys look to each other in panic, Mike shakes his head.

"No way, you can't take us without our parents allowing it!" He objects, the man offers a small quirk of his lips and leans over to look him in the eyes, glasses slipping down his nose.

"We'll be notifying your parents shortly, but we have a warrant for your arrest." He says quietly, Mike's heart begins to race.

"Come with us, we don't want to have to handcuff you." Another man says, he's got a shaved head and muscled arms. Mike glances back at Will; he looks pale and sick at the situation, eyes shining with worry. Lucas appears calm, but Mike can see the way he's shifting unsurely. Dustin seems to be looking to Mike, as if awaiting him to yell for them to run just so he can bolt out of the

room.

"Okay," Mike agrees quietly, tucking his hands into his jean pockets. "Let's go."

-

Nancy sits in her desk; she had gotten to class early so she could study for a quiz in first period. She flips her note cards lazily, she knew the material, and she was just making sure that she remembered everything. She had to get straight A's to finish school early, all it would take was finishing the year off with a 4.0 and she could get out of this town. Of course not away from the people, but the place itself, she was tired of it.

"Ms. Wheeler," Nancy jumps a little, glancing back at the door to see her Vice Principal Mr. Sellick standing just inside the room. "Come with me, please. And bring your things." He says quietly, completely serious.

"Is something wrong, sir?" She asks as she grabs her bag and stands slowly, stepping across the room towards the door. The man simply turns on his heel and leads her out of the room towards the office, and when she steps inside she immediately spots a man that seems out of place. He's wearing a formal black suit and glasses, blonde hair gelled into place.

"Nancy Wheeler?" He asks her with a frown, and she nods cautiously. "I'd like you to come with me, we'd like to talk to you." He explains, stepping forward as she steps back.

“I want to talk to my parents first,” She tells him firmly, he shakes his head.

“We’re notifying your parents, you’re being placed under arrest.” He reaches out and takes her bag and grabbing her arm, holding it tight when she tries to pull away. “Resisting won’t help you.” He snaps.

“What am I being arrested for?” She demands as a pair of handcuffs is placed on her wrists, luckily she hadn’t been made to keep her hands behind her back.

“Trespassing on government property and interfering with a government investigation.” The man tells her promptly as she’s escorted out of the office with a hand on her upper back. All eyes are on her, murmurs and whispers as she passes other students. She keeps her head high and her expression flat as she steps outside; there are two black vans and a black car near the front of the school. She’s led to the back van and the back door is opened.

Jonathan and Steve are sitting on a bench just inside the van, and their heads swivel to look at them as the door opens. Steve offers a weak smile and lifts his handcuffed wrists to wave one hand. Nancy is assisted into the van and she sits across from them, the doors are slammed closed and she sighs. Jonathan is staring down at his feet, and Steve’s eyes are on the windows on the back door.

“You think they have the boys?” Nancy questions quietly, and Jonathan nods his head without looking up. “What are they gonna do to us, you think?” She whispers, Steve meets her eyes,

expression serious and eyes a little sad.

"Nothing good." He mutters, before turning his head towards Jonathan and bumping their shoulders together. "So let's get together right now… How about we be the brattiest and most uncooperative teenagers in existence when they interrogate us?" He suggests, and Jonathan scoffs quietly, Nancy can't help but smile as Steve's lips quirk into a mischievous grin.

"Well we can't make it easy for them, can we?" She says with a smirk.

"Give'em hell, Nancy Wheeler." Steve tells her, holding up his hand for a high five. Nancy chuckles and awkwardly brings up her bound hands to smack one against Steve's.

"Will you stop it?" Jonathan mutters, bringing one of his knees up onto the bench and resting his cuffs on it. He looks at them, eyes slightly angry and jaw clenched. "This is serious, don't you get it?" He whispers.

"Look, if they want Eleven they'll have to pry her from our cold, dead fingers, Jonny." Steve tells him, sure of himself. Jonathan scowls and shakes his head, pulling his hands against his cuff's hold with an agitated sigh. "They aren't gonna kill us," He says confidently, as if his final statement didn't contradict his first.

"If they wanted Eleven they could have taken her easy. They're looking for something else, one of us, otherwise they'd just kill us off. They would have taken us somewhere out of public eye,

they wanna make a show of this… They're turning us into criminals; we're completely at their mercy." He says through gritted teeth. "If you're not scared right now, you don't get it in the slightest."

"Of course I'm scared, Jonathan, how could you say that?" Steve mutters, looking genuinely hurt. Jonathan seems a little cowed at the words, guilty and hesitant to say anything else. "I'm terrified, man, but it doesn't mean we can't put up a fight. If we show them we're scared then they win, and I won't go down like that." He reaches over, frowning down at his handcuffs before looping his arms over Jonathan's head. "C'mere."

Jonathan looks vaguely amused at the awkward attempt at affection; he leans forward and drops his head on Steve's shoulder. Nancy watches his cuffed hands clasp at Steve's t-shirt gently, and she feels like she's spying on this intimate moment. But then Steve turns his head a little and smiles genuinely at her, reassuring and positive, a beacon of light in dark times.

They would make it through this, without a doubt.

-

"So what's the prognosis?" Hopper questions with a quirk of his eyebrow, the girl seated in the passenger seat offers him a confused expression in response and he laughs quietly. "The ice cream, kid, how is it?" He elaborates, the girl nods in understanding and licks her chocolate cone once more.

"Good," She offers simply, her lips stained lightly with it.

“Yum.” She adds, as if to reassure him.

“Repeat after me, El.” He urges, smiling at her reassuringly as she frowns at him. “The ice cream is good.” He says, gesturing to her. “You say it, say the ice cream is good.” He says once more, she licks her ice cream once more and smacks her lips.

“Ice cream… is… good.” She repeats, and he grins at her.

“Great, that’s great!” He chuckles as the girl smiles brightly at him in accomplishment. He bites into his cone, pointing at the door behind her. “Put your seat belt on, girly.” He instructs, she pulls on her seatbelt gently and seems to struggle with it for a moment before Hopper reaches over to help her clip it in.

“Now all we gotta do is-“ He cuts himself off at the sight of a black car pulling out from an alley and parking just a few feet in front of his patrol car. “Shit.” He mutters, glancing around at their surroundings. Eleven looks to him in confusion and concern; he reaches over and takes her slightly sticky hand into his comfortingly. “It’s okay, I’ll be right back.”

“B-But…” Eleven shakes her head when he opens his door, reaching for his hand again. “Friends protect friends. Not safe.” She tells him firmly, and he glances to the black car with dark tinted windows before looking back to the girl.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t leave you here…” He says quietly, sighing as he gets out of the car and walks around to the passenger side. “I don’t want you to let go of my hand, okay?” He

instructs as he takes the girl's frail little hand and walks over to the car. The back door opens and he slides into the back seat, pulling the girl inside with him.

-

They stay pretty much silent on the ride to wherever these people were taking them, unsure as to what they were supposed to be doing. Jonathan tries to count the turns, Steve keeps trying to see out of the window but all he could say was that there was a long stretch of road with nothing but trees on either side.

After about ten minutes, Jonathan is sure that they're bringing all of them out to the woods to execute them. He hates feeling helpless and at the mercy of someone else, it had come from years of experiencing just that. After being under someone's thumb for most of his life, it was a new sort of freedom to just be without that fear. But now it was creeping up on him, anxiety making his palms sweaty and his body restless.

Steve stuck by him, their bodies pressed side to side without any give, as if they were reassuring one another. All the Harrington boy could say was that it was going to be okay, and really Jonathan wasn't sure if he was trying to convince them or himself. Nancy was calm and level headed, but her eyes held well-concealed fear in them. They were headed into a dark tunnel, and there was no way of knowing whether or not there would be light at the end of it.

Eventually the doors open and they're in front of a large building which seemed like it was in the middle of nowhere. They're escorted out of the vehicle, Jonathan tries to watch the other van to see if they had the younger kids as well, but they're ushered inside

before he can find out.

"This is some serious horror movie material." Steve mutters as they walk along clean marble flooring towards a front desk where a petite older woman was sitting. She had golden hoop earrings and her hair was tied back in a bun, when they approach with the men behind them she barely looks up.

"Who is this?" She asks quietly, one of the men clears his throat.

"Jonathan Byers, Nancy Wheeler, and Steve Harrington." He explains without hesitation, she writes something down on her clipboard and glances up at them.

"I see, they're waiting." The woman holds unclips a paper from a stack near the edge of her desk and holds it out for the man, who takes it and observes it for just a moment.

"Thank you," He turns towards a hallway on the left, and they're led forward once more. "Byers, through here." He points to one door, Jonathan glances back at Steve and Nancy in alarm as he shakes his head. "Don't make me force you, kid." He warns tiredly, Jonathan takes one more look at his friends before opening the door and stepping into the room.

It looks to be an interrogation room, a really clean one at that. He turns around and presses his ear to the door, should he run or try to escape? The click of the lock on the door decides this for him, he straightens out and drops his forehead against the cool metal.

Another door opens on the other side of the room, heels click across the floor and a chair is pulled out. Jonathan turns to find a woman before him in a maroon pantsuit, her eyes scanning a file on the table carefully while her long pink nails tap softly against the surface of the table.

“Who are you?” He asks quietly, the woman glances up at him with intrigued green eyes as she looks the boy before her over a few times.

“Please take a seat, Mr. Byers, it’s only polite.” She closes the file and crosses her arms as she leans back in her chair slightly, he hovers a little closer the table automatically but stops himself before he can sit.

“It’s not very polite to have us arrested.” He tells her quietly in reply.

“Well that’s because you and your friends are in a lot of trouble, but we’re trying to help you.” She points to the seat and he sinks down into the chair, unease rolling through him as she stares intensely at him. He glances down at the table, metal and cold against his arms as they press against the edge.

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” He says, sure of himself in that. The woman sighs and shifts in her chair, he squeezes his eyes shut and wishes so very badly that when he opens them he’ll be back home. But no such luck, he’s still staring at the gray metal table in a foreign place where he was apparently at the mercy of the government.

“You’ve been sticking your noses where they do not belong, Mr. Byers.” She tells him simply, he shakes his head and twists his hands irritably in his handcuffs.

“You tried to cover up my brother’s disappearance; you made me think he was dead.” He whispers, voice shaking with badly concealed anger. “You can’t say that’s not my business because it is, it became my business the second we fished that fake body from the water.” He says through gritted teeth, looking up at the woman and meeting her cold emotionless eyes.

“What about the girl, then? Why exactly is that your business and who involved you in her retrieval?” She questions, he scoffs a quiet laugh and shakes his head.

“You mean her rescue, from the hellish nightmare that you sent her to. You people are sick, they’re just kids, and you can’t involve them in your experiments and treat them like rats in a maze.” He spits, she quirks an eyebrow at him and clasps her hands together on the top of the table.

“Listen, Mr. Byers, it may not seem like it, but we are trying to help you.” She explains softly, and he shakes his head emphatically.

“You can’t feed me this horseshit because I’m not buying it.” He snaps at her without reserve, standing up with a scrape of his chair. “All you’ve done is ruin our lives, how does it make you feel to know that you’re part of something that has caused so many people so much pain?” He demands, approaching the table again.

He could do it; he could hurt her easily… She would deserve it, she's working with him. His fists egg him on, itch restlessly and demand vengeance. He takes in a deep breath and sighs out through his nose, turning away and glancing up at the video camera on the wall.

"I understand you're angry, but you're stepping into things you can't even begin to comprehend." The woman beckons him back to the table, so he sits once more, a little more roughly than before. "I'm sure you know James Hopper." She says with a tilt of her head, he nods carefully. "He made a deal with us a while back, and we'd like to make a similar deal." She explains to him with a hand gesture.

"Hopper's working with you?" Jonathan asks weakly, stomach twisting as his entire viewpoint turns upside down. How could he work with those assholes? How could he do all of this without telling them? But… "Eleven." He whispers, the woman's face brightens a little and she smiles, although it seems forced.

"No harm will come of the girl, your brother, or any of your friends and family as long as you make a deal with us." She promises, he bites his lip anxiously and shifts uncomfortably.

"What sort of deal?" He murmurs, and her smile grows into a more genuine one. He swallows the nervous feeling building in the back of his throat, and sits up a little straighter.

"We will drop the charges on all of you without any repercussions… Only if you stay away from the power company in town, you don't go near any of the so-called gates to the other world

or interfere with any of the goings on, and you never speak a word of this to anyone. That means no contact with the media, no trying to get the word out, no exposing plans." She informs him firmly, he nods his head slowly.

"What else?" He asks hesitantly, she stands up.

"You submit to having your blood drawn, for testing." She says simply, he frowns and glances away from her.

"What sort of testing?" He questions, she shakes her head.

"No questions, Mr. Byers… No questions asked, deal or no deal?" She offers her hand as she approaches him; he clenches his sweaty palms together and then wipes them on his jeans.

"You won't hurt Eleven?" He reiterates firmly, she nods confidently in reply. He pulls both arms up and shakes with one awkwardly, she grins almost maliciously and he feels sick.

"Brilliant." She grins, sighing as if it was one less thing for her to worry about. "I'll be back in a few minutes to take a blood sample." She tells him, and then turns on her heel and steps out of the room. He stares down at the table for a long time, feeling like he might have just signed his soul over to the devil.

-

Eleven's words echo in his head as he searches the streets frantically for her, he didn't mean for this to happen. She hadn't reacted well to his involvement with the people she had coined the 'bad men'. Within just a few minutes of discussing the girl's return to this dimension along with the kids being apparently interrogated, she'd jumped from the car and scrambled out of sight before he could even get out of the car.

"Not a friend! You promised! Bad man!"

"El!" He shouts as he races down the street, glancing one way and another as he crosses to the other side of the road. She was nowhere in sight, he had lost her.

"Jim!" Joyce's car pulls up to the curb, he feels like he's been caught until he sees the frantic look on the woman's face. He jogs over to the car, leaning over as she ducks her head out of the window. "The boys' teacher called and said that a bunch of men in black suits took the boys in for questioning on some sort of trespassing charge." She says with panic, he nods his head gravely.

"They just told me they were going to pick up the kids,, I swear I didn't know." He looks one way down the street and the other.

"They came to you again?" She demands, he sighs and nods once more. "Where's El?" She questions, he makes a face and she glares at him. "Get in the car, Jim." She tells him, he hurries around to the passenger side and slips into the vehicle.

“What are we going to do?” Jim asks as they turn the corner.

“We’re going to find them.”

-

“Y’know, we never went over the fence. Technically, it wasn’t trespassing.” Mike tells the man in front of him casually, he had been trying to wheedle information out of him for what seemed like forever. He wasn’t sure what was going to incriminate him, or if they really had anything on him at all. But from the look of irritation on the man’s face, obviously it wasn’t going his way.

“You and your friends are in far more trouble than you know, kid.” He says quietly, voice serious, but he really didn’t seem that threatening anymore. It was obvious he wasn’t going to hurt him, so why should he hold back on his sarcasm and wit and every little bit of annoyingness that he had built up over the past thirteen years of his life?

“Apparently not, because I’m not getting arrested.” He shrugs his shoulders and smiles sweetly when the man’s jaw clenches. “I really don’t know anything, so can I go now?” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder, the man growls in annoyance and looks away from him.

In just a few minutes, a woman comes in.

“Leave, Baker.” She says without a care, and the man waves a hand before hurrying from the room with a few stomps of his boots and the slam of the door. “Mr. Wheeler, it’s nice to meet you.” She smiles, piercing green eyes hiding a malicious intent behind them.

This. This was the real threat.

-

After the blood test, the handcuffs are removed and Jonathan is escorted out of the building by one of the men from before. There’s a gathering of familiar faces just outside near the cars, and they all turn to watch him come out before Will breaks from the group to race over and hug him.

“Hey kid,” He leans down to catch him in his arms, lifting the boy up and squeezing him tight. “You okay? Did they hurt you?” He asks softly, feeling relieved at the shake of Will’s head against his shoulder. He walks forward, letting the boy down and wrapping a hand around the boy’s shoulder as he continues towards the group.

The boys are all there, Nancy, but…

“Where’s Steve?” He demands, eyes scanning the gaggle of kids for any sort of answer when Nancy doesn’t seem to have one. He turns right around and storms over to the front doors, where a few of the men are gathered and talking quietly. “Hey!”

As soon as the big guy with blonde hair and glasses turns, Jonathan shoves him hard. All he can think of is Steve's optimistic voice and his gentle tone, and the idea of that being harmed in any sort of way enrages him far more than it should.

"Where's my friend?" He snarls, struggling as he's grabbed roughly by two other men and held fast. "Tell me!" He orders, kicking wildly as he's lifted off the ground by his arms.

"Jonathan!" Nancy calls over the other kids, shouting curse words and other colorful sentences towards the large men.

"Let him go!"

"Bastards!"

"Get your hands off of him!"

"Hold up! Hey!" A figure pushes through the commotion and Jonathan is faced with Steve Harrington, eyes wide in confusion and face twisted with worry. "C'mon fellas, let him down." He urges as the noise quiets, the men drop Jonathan without any further prompting and step away.

"Watch it, kid. We're not people you want to mess with." The blonde sneers at him, before they turn away and head back inside.

“You okay?” Steve asks as he approaches hesitantly, Jonathan nods his head and swallows as he observes the other.

“Are you?” He questions, Steve shrugs and glances away for a moment before smiling weakly.

“Well we did promise to be instigating bratty teenagers, didn’t we?” He holds up his hand, his fingers are curled in slightly and when Jonathan pulls his sleeve up gently he hisses. Steve’s wrist is swollen slightly.

“I should kill them; they promised nobody would get hurt.” He whispers, Steve frowns in confusion and the others are absolutely silent.

“Why would they promise that?” He asks quietly, eyes scanning over Jonathan’s face in concern. Everyone looks to Jonathan in suspicion and alarm, all eyes on him, demanding answers. The sound of tires against the gravel pulls their attention away, the teens watch as the kids step over near the van ready to take them home.

Jonathan takes a step to follow them, but Steve snags his jacket and pulls him back.

“Hey, man, we’re not done here.” He says quietly, placing himself between Jonathan and the car. “What did you do, Jonny?” He asks sincerely, Jonathan shakes his head. “You know you can’t trust these people.” He insists quietly.

“Steve’s right, Jonathan. These guys aren’t playing games; you can’t play double agent in this.” Nancy adds to the conversation, eyes wide and concerned.

“I did what I had to do, and I’m apparently not the only one.” Jonathan storms past the two and over to the kids before climbing into the van and taking a seat next to Will and against the back wall. The ride back feels longer than the ride there, but maybe it’s just because Jonathan can’t stop thinking about Jim not telling them that he was working with those assholes.

Nancy and Steve are seated on the opposite side of the van and they’re talking quietly and occasionally glancing over to Jonathan. It makes him want to hit something or someone, probably Steve considering he thought he could tell Jonathan what was right and wrong. The other kids are discussing their interrogations, and all of them sound vaguely similar.

When they pull to a stop, the back doors are opened and they’re in front of the Byers house. The kids all climb out and Dustin makes a show of sticking his tongue out at one of the men before they all race over to the front porch. Jonathan steps past Steve and Nancy with his eyes on the ground, wanting nothing more than to be left alone.

Maybe he was feeling guilty for making the deal, he felt nauseous and fidgety. He trudges up to the front porch and sinks down onto the steps, remembering how just this morning he got into an altercation with his father. Now he was knees deep in an alliance with the people that were responsible for him thinking his brother was dead.

“Inside, guys.” Nancy orders the boys, who practically step on one another just to get in the door as they laugh and chatter.

“Lovers’ quarrel.” Dustin taunts, Nancy shoves him through the door and follows him inside. Jonathan stares down at the ground as Steve’s shoes slowly shuffle into view.

“I’m not apologizing for saying what I said.” Steve says quietly as he sits down on the ground in front of Jonathan, crossing his legs and settling his hands in his lap.

“Good, because I’m not apologizing for what I did.” Jonathan mutters, wrapping his arms around his knees and resting his chin on them.

“What exactly did you do?” Steve questions carefully, Jonathan sighs sharply and presses his mouth hard against his knees, squeezing his wrist with his opposite hand. His mind is a mix of guilt and shame but also anger and rage, he couldn’t tell if he’d made the right choice or not. “Hey, look at me.” Jonathan flinches when Steve’s hand touches his cheek.

He looks away from his knees and down at Steve, who’s staring at him with earnestly soft eyes. Tears well into Jonathan’s eyes and he bites his lip to keep them from spilling over. He’d made a mistake, a huge mistake trusting those people. What if it costs them something, what if it makes everything worse?

“I’m sorry,” He breathes, and when Steve pulls gently on his denim sleeve he pushes off of the porch and into the older boy’s arms. “I’m sorry, I messed up.” He whispers, gripping the back of Steve’s shirt tightly as his arms tighten around Jonathan.

“It’s okay,” Steve mumbles against his shoulder, rubbing his back comfortingly. “We all screw up sometimes, we can still fix it.” He promises, Jonathan sniffs quietly and coughs before releasing Steve hesitantly. He wipes at his face as Steve leans back, looking misty eyed himself.

“We should go to the hospital, you-your wrist.” He wipes at his face again, blinking rapidly to clear the remaining tears from his eyes.

“Doesn't hurt that bad…” Steve tells him, turning his arm over in an awkward movement and pulling up his sleeve carefully.

“Those bastards,” Jonathan mutters with a sigh, and Steve grins a little.

“Didn’t think I’d see the day Jonathan Byers was worried about my well-being.” He jokes, and Jonathan can’t help but give a weak smile in return.

“Just last year it never even occurred to me that I would actually like a hug from Steve Harrington.” He admits rather boldly, and Steve’s cheeks flush with color as he smiles back rather smugly.

“Byers…” Steve sighs, his eyebrows dipping down in the slightest.

“Harrington.” Jonathan states in response, just to tease him, and Steve smirks.

“Just drive me to the hospital before I kick your ass.” He says, using his good hand to lever himself off the ground.

“Yeah, sure.” Jonathan scoffs in disbelief, standing and climbing the porch steps. He opens the screen door and leans inside, finding Nancy sitting on the couch and flipping through a magazine. “Hey, I’m driving Steve to get his wrist checked out. Mind watching the boys?” He asks, she glances up at him and stands, setting the magazine down and approaching with a small frown.

“Are you and him okay?” She asks with concern, and he nods slowly.

“Yeah, it’s no big deal.” He assures, she smiles lightly and reaches out to touch his cheek.

“Are you okay?” She whispers, he scrunches his eyebrows together and nods once more. “Okay well, be safe.” She pulls him into a hug and he squeezes her back gently before turning and heading back down the porch towards the car… Or… The empty driveway where Steve is standing.

“Our cars are at the school,” Steve reminds him needlessly with a wide gesture of his arms as he approaches the shorter teen. Jonathan sighs and runs his hand through his hair, glancing around. “We could always walk,” He suggests, and Jonathan shakes his head.

“No, let’s just… Let’s call my mom or something…” He grabs Steve by his good arm and tugs him back over to the porch, leading him inside.

-

“I don’t understand, where could they have taken the kids?” Joyce says worriedly as they get back into their car, having been escorted back to their vehicle by the guards. Jim had played his little ‘break in’ technique and after about ten minutes of snooping they had found nothing and injured two security personnel.

“I made a deal with them; they said they’d leave the kids alone.” Jim reiterates quietly, Joyce isn’t sure if he’s trying to reassure her or himself, but she nods with a scowl as they pull out. She puts her seatbelt on as they begin to drive again, it isn’t long before Jim’s radio is hissing and popping with an almost inaudible voice on the other end.

“Chief this is the station; we got a call from the eldest Byers boy, over.” Joyce sighs in relief as Jim scrambles for the radio, clearing his throat and clicking the button on the side of it.

“This is Hopper, what did he say, over?” He asks, removing his thumb from the button and waiting.

“He was looking for his mother; he said he needed a ride to the hospital, over.”

“Jesus Christ, Hop!” Joyce smacks the man in the shoulder as he presses his foot harder on the gas. “I thought you said they wouldn’t hurt the kids, I swear to God if my baby boy is hurt I’m gonna hurt you.” She threatens; he shakes his head and offers no response as he shifts in his seat. She’d keep good on that word, definitely, and nobody wanted to be on the bad end of Joyce Byers.

-

“They were looking for something, definitely.” Lucas tells them as they gather around in Will’s room, Will is going through his comic books with delicate fingers and Dustin is reading one of them. Mike spins the wheel of a toy car idly as he stares at the door, Lucas shakes him by the shoulder to get his attention. “Did you hear me, man?” He asks in outrage, Mike shrugs.

“You think they’re gonna go after El next?” He asks quietly, Will pauses in his nervous sorting and Dustin looks up from his book.

“They’re looking at us, Mike. They’re looking for one of us.” Lucas says with certainty, and Dustin scowls.

“Which one of us?” He demands in agitation, Lucas gives him a look and Dustin then turns his eyes to Mike, as if he might

offer an answer.

"Did anyone else have blood taken?" Will asks suddenly, eyebrows furrowed and a perplexed expression on his face.

"Blood?" Lucas and Dustin repeat in alarm just as Mike answers "Yeah, why?"

Everyone is suddenly a mass of shouting and talking over one another, eyes wide and frantic as they sit up and exclaim to one another.

"Hey! Wait, shut up!" Mike calls out over them, causing them to fall quiet. "You mean you didn't have blood taken?" Mike demands with worry, Dustin and Lucas shake their heads surely. "Will, you did?" He asks, the boy nods his head nervously. "So did I…" He sits back on his haunches, swallowing roughly as they fall into another lapse of silence.

"Guess that narrows it down," Dustin offers weakly.

-

After Jonathan and Steve had returned inside, Jonathan had called around searching for his mom before coming back with some ice in a rag for Steve's wrist. They had been sitting next to each other and talking to Nancy for the past few minutes, not even noticing how Jonathan had Steve's hand in his lap to ice it.

It was sort of funny to see the way they acted around each other, slowly getting comfortable and yet not confronting their feelings for one another. Their approach to the relationship was rather backwards in her opinion, but it was whatever worked.

They had avoided talk about the interrogation, and instead discussed Steve's injury. He had admitted it was slammed against a table at an awkward angle, but didn't divulge anything else. Jonathan seemed pretty ticked about the whole situation, but every time Steve looked at him he seemed to relax a little.

"Nancy?" Mike hurries into the living room with the other boys following close behind him. "Nancy, did you have blood drawn at the place?" He asks in a rush, Nancy frowns at him and opens her mouth to answer.

"Yeah, little dude." Steve agrees easily, Nancy's head turns so fast it makes her neck cramp. Jonathan's eyes are wide when she meets them, but he doesn't look surprised, just like he'd been caught. "Didn't you, Nance?" Steve inquires with a little more hesitation.

"No, no I didn't…" She murmurs, looking back to the boys. "Did you guys?" Mike and Will look to each other and they both nod as Lucas and Dustin shake their heads.

"So… You guys, Will, and Mike all had blood drawn..." Nancy directs this to the teen boys seated on the couch, and they nod warily. "What for, what are they looking for?" She mutters, standing up and crossing her arms.

“I thought it was just me, it was part of the deal.” Jonathan speaks up suddenly, everyone stares at him until his face grows red in embarrassment and shame.

“You made a deal with those assholes?” Dustin asks with trepidation, Jonathan ducks his head as he nods and Steve reaches his good arm around to settle it on Jonathan’s shoulders.

“I told the woman that if they left everyone, including Eleven alone, I would agree to her terms and conditions.” He admits, Nancy sits down on the edge of the coffee table with a sigh.

“What did you agree to?” She questions softly, he frowns.

“I said we’d stop snooping around the power company, we wouldn’t go near anymore portals, and that we wouldn’t try to expose them. And of course, that I’d give blood.” He lists quietly, reaching up to scratch at his cheek. “I did it to protect you guys, it was my best bet.” He explains himself solemnly.

“The woman said we were all going to get our blood tested.” Will adds, and Mike nods his head.

“She said we were all doing it,” The boy agrees, hands fidgeting nervously. Jonathan and Nancy look to Steve for his own version, he holds up his wrist as an answer.

“They said everyone, but I told them to go piss up a rope and they got one of those big douchebags to use a night stick on my wrist.” He says almost shyly, Jonathan’s face contorts into a scowl at that but it dissipates when Steve turns his head to look at him. Jonathan looks up at Nancy with pleading eyes, as if beseeching her to solve everything. She had no clue what was happening, or why they had only targeted a few of them. There were too many puzzle pieces and not enough clues to figure out what the whole picture meant.

“Mom’s home,” Will says suddenly, eyes on the front wall window. “And Hopper’s with her.”

“Good, I’d like a word with him.” Jonathan says, standing up and storming over to the front door.

“Jonny!” Steve calls, jumping up and leaping over the table to hurry after him. Nancy sighs and rushes out after the boys, feeling like an older sister watching not one younger sibling but a whole house full of them.

-

When Jonathan comes running out of the house, Joyce immediately sees that he doesn’t seem to be injured. But his eyes are focused on Jim and it becomes obvious that he’s not too happy as he points a finger at the man with a glare. The other kids are running out of the house after Jonathan, all seemingly unharmed except for Steve, who’s cradling his wrist to his chest awkwardly.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Jonathan snaps, everyone jerks at his tone of voice and Joyce’s mouth drops open in surprise.

“Jonathan!” She says, voice scolding and confused.

“I’m sorry?” Jim frowns, eyebrows lifting high on his forehead as he props his hands on his hips.

“You’re in cahoots with those bastards, you’ve been on their side and you’ve been keeping it from us! From me, from my mom?!” He snarls, hands clenched into fists at his sides.

“Jonathan, you don’t understand!“ Jim begins, Jonathan shakes his head vehemently and steps back when the man reaches for him.

“Don’t even try to fix this, where’s Eleven?” He demands, looking around. “Did you hand her right back to them?” He grits his teeth, tears in his eyes; all he can hear is her voice crying out for help. He never should have trusted this man, these people, he could never trust anyone!

“I would never do that!” Jim exclaims in defense, Jonathan scoffs a dry laugh.

“Sure, just like you would never work for the bad guys.” He sneers.

“Sweetheart, calm down.” Joyce steps between them, placing her hands on his chest gently and looking up at him in worry. “I knew.” She says solemnly, and his mouth drops open, speechless.

“B-But…” He shakes his head weakly, fists loosening and eyes blurring his vision. “Why would you keep something like that from me?” He whispers, she sighs in distress and pulls his head down to press her forehead to his.

“This isn’t your problem to solve, baby.” She tells him, he shakes his head and pulls away.

“What happened to ‘you aren’t alone’? Or all that other bullshit you told me the day I got arrested? We’re supposed to be in this together!” He bites his lip and wipes at his eye, when his mother approaches him again he steps back. “We were arrested; Steve got beat up!” He exclaims.

“Jonathan, I was doing what was right for you and Will.” She says, sure of herself, but he can’t believe her. She betrayed his trust, chose Jim over her own damn son.

“Jonathan, Eleven ran off when she heard me talking to those guys… I know it wasn’t the smartest choice, but it was one that I made to protect everyone.” Jonathan hears his own voice in those words, but he hated them all the same. It was a dumb mistake, how could he make the same dumb mistake as Jim Hopper? The man was putting the moves on his mom, it didn’t mean he could play all knowing dad to Jonathan.

“You’re here while she’s out there somewhere on her own? What if those men get ahold of her? Hurt her again?!” He demands, Jim flinches in the slightest and Jonathan turns away. He turns and walks past Steve, Nancy, and the kids.

“Jonathan, get back here, where are you going?” Joyce calls to him, he waves a hand.

“Take Steve to the hospital, I have to find her!” He shouts, hurrying around to the back of the yard and observing the treetops and the expanse of forest beyond him. She would keep away from people, he knew that much, all he had to do was find her before anyone else did.

“Jonny!” Steve catches up to him as he’s stepping into the trees, his arm is still loosely clutched to his chest and there’s pain on his face, but also determination.

“Go away, Steve.” He instructs firmly as he continues walking, he’d search the junk yard first and then he’d head to Mike’s house. He’d sweep the woods as he went and hopefully it wouldn’t take him long to stumble upon the girl.

“No, I’m not letting you do this alone. I learned from earlier that if you’re left alone you make stupid decisions.” Steve’s good hand slips into his easily; clasping Jonathan’s firmly and not pulling him back but connecting them. “You’re stuck with me, man.” He promises, Jonathan looks back at the young man in an attempt to fish out a mistruth, but he only finds honest eyes where he seeks out some form of lie. He's quiet for a long moment, and then he sighs as

he folds.

“Let me fix that, then.” Jonathan shrugs out of his denim jacket and hands it to Steve to hold for a moment, skin prickling with goose bumps as he slips his plaid over shirt off.

“Put your damn clothes back on, it’s freezing.” Steve scoffs; Jonathan aims a glare in his direction to silence him. He takes back his denim jacket and ties his plaid shirt’s sleeves together, slipping it over Steve’s neck and fashioning a sling. “Oh.”

“Just keep your arm in that, you’ll be less likely to screw it up anymore. It's probably only a sprain anyway.” He helps Steve adjust his arm in the sling, and when he deems it good enough he steps back. “Come on, it’s getting late.” He takes Steve’s hand again, tugging him along.

“Wait!” Dustin and Lucas come running towards them, Nancy bringing up the rear. “Wait for us, we want to help.” Dustin tells him sincerely, Jonathan frowns down at them for a moment.

“Where are Mike and Will?” He asks curiously, the group of boys rarely separated.

“Hopper and your mom want to help too; Mike and Will are going to tell them where to look.” Lucas explains with a wave of his hand, and when Jonathan glances towards Nancy she holds up a flashlight and shakes it lightly. Jonathan holds his hand out and catches it when she throws it to him, she switches one in her other hand to her free hand.

“All right, it gets dark soon so we have to cover a lot of ground.” Nancy says, Jonathan nods his head and smiles lightly when Steve squeezes his hand gently.

“Then let’s get to it, fan out but don’t go out of hearing range.” He explains to the boys, who nod their heads in understanding before rushing out on opposite sides. Nancy starts walking ahead, looking back only to offer them a lingering smirk before stepping out of immediate earshot.

“Hey, what do you say after we find El, we take a nap as our first date?” Steve asks as they walk through the trees, Jonathan grins as he surveys the area ahead of them in slow sweeps.

“No burger, no movies?” He asks teasingly, Steve shakes his head with a quiet laugh.

“No, man, I’m tired. My bed or yours?” He questions, Jonathan tips his head up to laugh deep from his chest, an actual carefree noise.

“Mine is good, I have good music and thick blankets.” He offers as a defense, Steve frowns in over exaggerated pondering thought as he nods.

“I mean the music is debatable, but thick curtains.” He smiles, his thumb rubbing in slow sweeping motions along the back of Jonathan’s hand. “So uh… This is…” He murmurs, slowing in his

pace, Jonathan turns to face him hesitantly.

"Yeah?" Jonathan murmurs anxiously, Steve shifts his weight back and forth for a moment as if debating his next words.

"I might be a lot of things, but one thing I am is a gentlemen." He says, earning an amused snort from the other boy. "I am!" He insists with a slightly higher pitch, but he's smirking in the slightest. "Jonathan Byers, can I kiss you?" He questions softly, stepping in a little closer.

Jonathan can't believe his ears, his heart beating fast in his chest and his palm sweating in Steve's hold. But Steve isn't letting go and he's a firm presence, a persistence reality that Jonathan hadn't quite accepted as real just yet. What he really can't believe, is his own mind and the thoughts rushing through it.

"S-Sure," He offers a small shrug in an attempt to display casualness, but no action he's made before has ever been casual or easygoing in any way. Despite this, Steve nods his head and glances down at his lips for a fraction of a second before leaning down.

It's quick, a soft touch of lips that is far gentler than anything he expected. It's not filled with fireworks and excitement, his heart isn't racing but beating steady. But there's warmth in the pit of his stomach like stoking the small embers of a fire, growing slowly and filling his body with that overall good feeling.

"Come on already! Eleven is gonna need a walker by the time we find her!" Dustin calls suddenly from up ahead, they lean

apart and Jonathan can feel his entire face flushing as Steve's cheeks pink.

"Stop sucking face, guys!" Lucas shouts, Steve rolls his eyes and Jonathan can't wipe the smile off of his face.

"To be continued," Steve promises quietly, planting another kiss on the corner of Jonathan's mouth before pulling him forward through the trees. "We're almost to Mike's house, right?" He asks, glancing around.

"Yeah, she'd probably be looking for it." Jonathan tells him, glancing up to the tree tops where the sky was turning a beautiful hybrid of oranges and purples, signaling sunset. "We need to hurry; I don't want to be out here after dark." He mutters, and Steve nods his head.

"I've seen enough of Hawkins' creepy crawlies to last me a lifetime." He agrees with a snort, he swings their hands back and forth together and Jonathan takes a moment to think about how they got here. Sure it wasn't the best thing that he was kind of falling for another guy, it would be dangerous and not to mention rough. But that was his life; his entire existence was an ill-fitting puzzle piece with jagged edges, so what if he got a little happiness from it in some sort of way?

"How's your wrist?" He murmurs, Steve shrugs and glances down at it for a moment.

"I don't think it's broken, I broke my arm in ninth grade

and it hurt way more than this." He explains, then smiles a little. "Maybe you just have magic healing powers," He suggests jokingly, Jonathan scoffs and releases Steve's hand as they approach the area near Mike's side of the neighborhood.

"Eleven!" He hears Lucas and Dustin calling in intermitted intervals, but he doesn't think she's around here for some reason. Just that feeling in his gut, something so new to him and yet he was starting to grow accustomed to it, like a connection to the girl or the forces she has control over.

He suddenly gets that sick feeling he had gotten in the bathroom the night before. It felt like the time when he was twelve and he passed out from dehydration on the school field during gym, like exhaustion. He stops in his tracks, his legs shaking and his body going through a wave of weakness that makes him duck his head and close his eyes just to fight it off.

"Jonny?" He hears the voice distantly, almost like he was in a deep cavern. It felt like he was falling, everything muted around him and-

Someone shakes him and he opens his eyes, the feeling dissipating just as fast as it arrived. Steve is right in front of him now, hand gentle on his shoulder and head tipped to the side in an attempt to meet his lowered gaze.

"Everything okay?" Nancy and the boys are jogging over, Steve's hand moves to touch Jonathan's cheek hesitantly.

“I don’t know he zoned out or something.” Steve’s eyes are so warm and concerned, Jonathan gets lost in them for a moment. “Jonny, can you hear me?” Steve asks nervously, and he forces himself back into motion.

“M-Mhm.” He clears his throat, smiling weakly at Steve and glancing over at the others for barely a fraction of a second before glaring down at the ground. “Yeah, yeah I’m fine.” He assures, unsure as to what exactly had just happened.

“Maybe we should go back,” Nancy says quietly, and Jonathan shakes his head as the boys protest. “For Steve, I’m sure his arm is hurting.” She elaborates, and Steve nods carefully and smiles at Jonathan.

“Maybe your mom had better luck.” He offers, and Jonathan sighs and rubs his forehead as he turns around. Maybe he really was going crazy; wouldn’t that just be his luck? “Hey, get back here.” Steve picks up his pace and catches up to Jonathan, who barely glances at him.

“What?” He mutters, adjusting his jacket over his frame and sighing quietly.

“Well, I mean we kinda kissed… Maybe we should talk about that?” Steve suggests incredulously, voice hushed as they walk just a few feet ahead of the others.

“If you’re looking for a conversationalist, you shouldn’t have kissed me.” He says with irritation, he didn’t like the intimacy

of relationship talks. Hell, he could barely handle talking to people in general, let alone opening up to them. He wasn't built for relationships where someone didn't understand him to an extent, that's why he mostly kept to himself.

"I definitely don't need a conversationalist, I do enough talking." Steve says, trying to keep his upbeat tone as he walks alongside Jonathan. "So if you don't want to talk about it, then I'm going to put this as I'm currently in a relationship but it's casual and we're exclusively seeing one another." He explains with a wave of his good arm, Jonathan smirks a little.

"That's a lot of words," He comments in amusement, Steve grins.

"Well of course, I have to fill in your silence as I talk." He explains, reaching out and wrapping his arm around Jonathan's shoulders. "That's the reason we're good together, I talk and you… Brood…" He chuckles, Jonathan scoffs and quirks an eyebrow at him, Steve points to him in victory.

"See? Just one facial expression and you manage to say 'Shut up, Steve'." He runs his hand through the air as if he's reading it from the sky, Jonathan shakes his head.

"That was not 'Shut up, Steve'." He disagrees easily, Steve frowns at him exaggeratedly and he shrugs his shoulders. "It was more like 'You're lucky you're charming'." He elaborates quietly, Steve makes a soft 'aw' of a noise and a saliva filled kiss is smacked against his cold cheek. Jonathan grimaces as he wipes at his cheek with his jacket sleeve.

“You two are disgusting,” Dustin proclaims from behind them, Steve turns his head and flips the young man off. The boy returns the gesture without hesitation and Nancy slaps his hand down with a scolding noise. “Hey, he did it first!” Dustin objects.

“Nancy wants them to talk about their feelings,” Lucas coos tauntingly, both boys start to make kissing noises. Jonathan scowls back at them, giving them a glare that he hopes gives them the sense that they’re attempting to sign their death warrants.

“Feelings are gross, get a room!” Dustin grins, Steve leans down to pick up a stick and chucks it back at the boy, who yelps and scatters out of the way. “You could have killed me!” He hollers, Steve laughs.

“If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn’t have missed.” He says simply, Dustin races up behind him and pushes him playfully.

“Jerk face!” He sneers, Steve stumbles and snickers as Jonathan reaches back and snags the boy’s hat off of his head before placing it on his own. “Hey! Give it back!” He reaches for it, Jonathan scrambles away and breaks into a run.

“You gotta catch me first, Dustin!” He races through the leaves, tearing through the trees and listening to Dustin catch up to him. He glances back for a fraction of a second and his leg catches on something, he falls over it and slams into the ground, knocking the air from his lungs.

“Haha! Good always triumphs over evil!” Dustin snatches the hat back as Jonathan begins to push himself off of the ground. “You tripped over something,” He explains in intrigue as he steps over to the leave covered mound that Jonathan’s shins are still resting on.

“Jonny, you okay?” Steve calls from a few feet away as he comes walking over.

“Fine, just tripped.” He spins himself around and slides his legs off of the leaf pile, frowning at the sight of something white as a few leaves fall away. “What is that?” He mutters, leaning forward. Dustin has moved around it, pulling away a few leaves as Jonathan sits up and gets to his feet.

He jumps when Dustin starts screaming, the boy falls back, face pale and eyes wide in horror as he scrambles backwards. Jonathan moves around to get a glimpse, to see the lack of leaves on top of what was no dirt mound. Hair slicked back and damp, head turned at an awkward angle and blood is splashed over a lifeless face and wide open eyes.

Jonathan steps hurriedly back, Dustin’s still screaming. Jonathan’s vision doubles, spins, his breaths feel cold and his legs weak.

“What?!” Steve, Nancy, and Lucas are racing up to see what had caught them so off guard.

Jonathan turns away and staggers forward, dropping onto

his knees and retching. The face burned into his mind from just a few days ago is brought to the surface, except now it was so much more personal. He folds forward into himself, hugging his stomach and squeezing his eyes shut as he pants raggedly.

“Oh god,” Nancy gasps as Lucas screams; Jonathan’s mind is racing with thoughts that he can’t even begin to unravel from their tight knot of confusion and horror.

“Wh-Who is that?” Lucas asks shakily.

“It’s Lonnie,” Dustin rasps, still breathing heavily. “It’s Will’s dad.”

Notes for the Chapter:

(Oh shit that cliffhanger thoughhhh!!! I promise there will be an even worse cliffhanger next chapter lmao. As far as I've planned, there's gonna be 9 chapters.... So this story is coming to a close, it's only downhill from here my friends. Hope you enjoyed, please leave a comment and a kudos if you did!)

7. The Execution

After a moment or two of retching, Jonathan opens watery eyes to spot a familiar figure standing just through the trees. He pushes himself up, still feeling weak in the legs, he startles when Steve wraps an arm around his waist from behind to balance him. He's a steady weight against Jonathan's back that grounds him, doesn't allow him to zone out just yet.

"Hey, you okay?" Steve mutters, keeping the shorter boy faced away from the body of his father. Jonathan points out towards the figure, barely visible in the fading sunlight and hidden under the shadows of the trees above. "What the hell?" Steve seems to catch sight of the figure, Jonathan coughs.

"Eleven!" He calls, the girl stands very still for a long moment before stepping out further into the light. She seems sullen, ashamed perhaps, a part of Jonathan wonders if it was her that killed Lonnie. Would he blame her if she had? Did he even want to know?

"El?" Lucas and Dustin are rushing through the trees towards her.

"Grab her and let's go, we have to get back to the house and tell the Chief." Nancy instructs, the boys meet the girl halfway and hug her tight. "C'mon Steve, don't let him see it again." Nancy says quietly, Jonathan turns a little when Steve pulls him in one direction.

"Don't look, man. It's not worth it." Steve warns him quietly, Jonathan focuses his eyes on the ground and avoids looking

at the dead body off to their left. They reach the edge of the woods after a few minutes of walking quietly, Jonathan can only hear the leaves scattering across the ground and Lucas and Dustin whispering quietly.

When he glances up at the back yard, Jonathan sees a flash of his father chasing a young Will through the grass during one of his nicer spells. He blinks a few times, focusing on where Mike and Will are seated on the back porch steps.

“Eleven!” Mike crows in joy, the boys racing past the teens to hug the girl, who was quiet and solemn. “W-What’s wrong?” Mike asks gently, looking to the others in confusion. Eleven offers no explanation, neither do the others, they all look to Jonathan.

“Jonathan?” Will tugs on his sleeve; he can hear the back door swinging open as he meets the young boy’s eyes.

“Oh thank god, you found her.” Joyce says as they hurry across the yard.

“Jonathan?” Will repeats urgently, shuffling a little closer to his brother. Jonathan stares at him for a moment, speechless. How could he deliver such horrible news to a boy who had already been through so much? It would practically destroy him to hear that the man he had spit hateful words at earlier was now dead.

“What’s going on?” Joyce moves over to her sons, reaches out to place her hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. He trembles a little under the touch, mouth opening to just rid himself of the accursed

words, thoughts, the memories of the body… No, bodies, the bodies he'd seen. And why had he seen so many, from his brother's fake body, then Troy, now his own father. It felt like something was out to get him, out to get his family, and maybe it was.

"There's a body in the woods," He mutters, voice hoarse and burning from the acid in his throat.

"Where?" Jim demands just as the boys break into concerned chatter with one another.

"What happened?" Mike squeaks, looking from Eleven to Lucas and Dustin. "Did you kill someone?" He asks in a rush.

"It's all bloody and screwed up, I touched it!" Dustin exclaims, Will throws a wild eyed glance to the boys and then back to Jonathan. "It's all Night of the Living Dead and everything!"

"Shut the hell up!" Jonathan hollers, fists clenched at his sides and teeth gritting together. "Just shut up, can't you keep your mouth shut for five goddamn seconds?!" He snarls with rage, the boys, his mother, even Jim stare at him in shock.

"Jonny," Steve murmurs, stepping closer to him.

"It's dad, okay? Dad's dead, he's fucking dead." He snaps, unable to watch his mother or his brother's reaction as he turns away and starts to head inside. Jonathan keeps his head down and

practically sprints up to the back steps and swings the door open without caution. He storms down the hall and into his room, slamming the door behind him and finding himself itching restlessly in silence.

Jonathan takes in a few deep breaths as he walks slowly to his bed, turning and sinking down to sit on the mattress. He drops his face into his hands and wonders exactly what's wrong with him. He spent years hating his father, loathing his existence. He'd prayed him dead many a times, and now that he was, his stomach was coiling up with nausea.

Jonathan can hear the back door opening again and voices in the house and he hopes that everyone will know to leave him alone. He throws himself back onto his mattress, kicking his shoes off and scrambling under his blankets. There's a quiet knock on the door when he's reaching for his Walkman, he shrinks back down under his blankets and listens to the door opening.

"Jonathan?" It's Steve; he doesn't feel as trapped as he might with his mother. He turns over onto his back, running his fingers stressfully through his hair and sighing heavily. Steve doesn't even bother trying to smile at him, and he appreciates it as he watches the older boy approach the bed quietly.

"Hey," He whispers, Steve does smile a little then, just a soft quirk of his lips.

"I felt kind of felt out of place with everyone, hope you don't mind me joining you in here." He mutters, placing a knee on the bed and sitting down. Jonathan shrugs and sits himself up on his elbows, staring down at the rise in the covers where his feet were.

“How are my mom and Will?” He asks hesitantly, voice soft. Steve stares at the wall for a long moment, as if he’s trying to find something to say.

“In shock, I guess… Nancy’s taking the Chief to see the body, everyone else is in the living room.” He offers in reply, eyes scrolling down on the bed and then scanning over Jonathan. “But you don’t seem like you want to talk about it,” He says softly.

“You’re learning,” Jonathan observes with slight amusement, and Steve nods his head. He fidgets with the makeshift sling Jonathan had created for him, and he still thinks they should go to the hospital but honestly it seemed like he wasn’t that bothered by the injury.

“But… If you want to, I’ve been told I’m a listener of average ability.” He tells Jonathan with a one shouldered shrug.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” He sighs, turning onto his side away from Steve. He hesitates only a moment before glancing back at him “Do you mind like… Laying with me?” He inquires carefully, Steve frowns before nodding his head and shifting further onto the bed. He takes off the sling on his arm and Jonathan can’t help but watch him observe his wrist. “How is it?” He mutters.

“It feels better, I think it’s just sprained. Probably just need one of those thingies, you know.” He makes a gesture to his wrist as if it might help his case, but Jonathan luckily understands that he means a brace and nods his head. His mom had hurt her own hand stacking boxes the year before, he wondered if she still had it around

somewhere. Steve slips underneath the blankets with an easy movement, and it should make him feel nervous but it doesn't.

"How's this?" He can feel Steve's feet brush against his calves, but other than that he still keeps his distance. He remembers the feeling this morning -before everything was shattered by his father- when Steve had wrapped himself around Jonathan without restraint in his sleep.

"Good," He mumbles, too much of a coward to ask for anything else. Steve clears his throat quietly, fidgeting in the slightest before a hand is placed on Jonathan's waist. His fingers splay out gently, cautious and unsure, and he scoots just a bit closer.

"Still good?" He inquires, he seems to gain a little more confidence at Jonathan's nod and he shifts even closer. His good arm wraps fully around Jonathan, tucking underneath his other side and pulling him back against Steve.

Jonathan relaxes in his grip, sighing softly as Steve presses his face against the back of Jonathan's neck. A lot of people figured he just didn't like being touched, but as a kid he was extremely tactile. He just had to trust someone to let his guard down around them, and honestly even then he was rather fidgety. But Steve had proven himself; he was technically Jonathan's boyfriend now wasn't he?

That was an odd thing to think about… Boyfriend…

"Are you okay?" Jonathan murmurs into the quiet, and

Steve shifts a little but doesn't move away, in fact he seems to move even closer somehow. The body language is somehow understood by Jonathan, he feels like he's slowly getting in touch with Steve's personal habits. He moved a lot when he was unsure, like he was ready to bolt at any moment, but his touches were firm and sure. It was like his personality really, confidence hiding insecurity.

"Me?" Steve asks in confusion, Jonathan nods his head. "I mean, I guess. I'm not really dealing with any serious emotional turmoil, of course you never know, might have to cut my hand off." He replies jokingly with a shrug, he squeezes the young man in his grip and Jonathan finds relief in the feeling. It doesn't feel trapping, or unsafe, it feels like his next breath is easier than the last and it reaches far deeper as well. He sighs against the sheets and just breathes, mind slowing with its images and memories.

-

Will feels like his world has slowed to a halt, his mind bursting with so many thoughts that were not only guilt ridden but sorrowful as well. The last words he'd said to his father, was that he hated him, what sort of last words were those? He felt sick at the thought of it, and sitting on the couch between his mother and Mike he felt like he wasn't even present.

He went somewhere sometimes, he wasn't quite sure where, but it was far away from reality. He did it when he was troubled or stressed, he just lost everything around him. Everything felt muted and distant, but it kept him from breaking apart entirely.

His brother had been so angry, so very affected by Lonnie's death. Will couldn't remember a time, except maybe one when they

were extremely little, that Jonathan expressed love towards his father. Jonathan was a troubled kid, and back then Will never understood why. But holding such contempt when it came to their father was probably a reason. He'd go into his room and Will would find him curled up in bed crying or staring at nothing.

Will had always wondered why Jonathan was so unhappy; it had taken him years to puzzle even part of it out. He used to make dumb jokes to cheer his brother up and jump onto his mattress while he was listening to music to act like he was a bear attacking him. For the longest time, the only time Will ever saw Jonathan laugh or smile was when he caused it. He had dedicated himself to the cause from a young age, and he was glad he might have helped in harder times.

But how could someone that was a source of pain and deep unhappiness die and still pull something from Jonathan? He didn't quite understand it himself, but he supposed that his own experience that morning was a clue in itself. He had been so angry, so resentful of his father. He'd spit angry words and wanted so dearly for him to stop being the person he was, but it didn't mean he stopped having love for the man he once knew. The man that hadn't done much, but Will's careless younger self might have seen more potential from him, and the hopes and ideals he held would never fade.

Love was a hard thing to lose, even after being repeatedly hurt and disappointed, it had taken a long time for Will to see the faults in his father. Even then, he never lost that residual feeling, the feeling of attachment.

Will stands suddenly, everyone's voices distant as he heads into the hallway. He doesn't even bother knocking on the door, too numb to think about politeness. He twists the knob and steps inside, staring at the bed where Steve and Jonathan lay. Jonathan was

wrapped up in Steve's embrace, quiet and still. Will knew then that despite their views on their father differed, they were still feeling the same thing.

Loss of what could have been, what should have been.

"Jonathan," He croaks, watching as Steve shifts and glances back. He moves away from Jonathan, obviously expecting to have to leave. His socked feet touch the carpet and Will shuffles forward, he pats Steve's shoulder gently. "You don't have to go." He permits softly, Steve nods his head and Will pulls himself onto the bed as Jonathan sits up.

He throws himself at the older boy, wrapping his arms around his neck and burying his face into his brother's shoulder. Jonathan hugs him back, running his fingers through his hair in a tender caress that Will had once wished were his father's. But he knew now that dreams and reality were something far different, and his expectations were never to come true. Even though he wanted Lonnie to be the father that some boys had, he had Jonathan, which was far better than what most kids had.

He had it far better than Jonathan, who only grew up with his father as a male role model. He grew up fractured and broken and without proper support, and the only love he ever knew was from their mother. And in turn, Jonathan had become the most important person in Will's life. He didn't take the dark path, he took what he had and made the best of it, tried to ensure a good life for his younger brother.

"I love you," Will whispers, and it sounds more like a promise than anything else.

“I love you too, buddy.” Jonathan mutters, squeezing him once more. When they pull away from each other, Will glances over at Steve, who’s facing the door but still seated on the bed. Like he didn’t know what to do so he was trying to make himself invisible. It was awkward and hesitant, and Will knew that Steve was one of the boys he’d had it better than. He was one of the boys without a loving father, without someone to support and reassure him.

Will slips to the side, placing Jonathan in the middle of the bed. When his brother looks at him funny, he nods his head towards Steve. Jonathan follows his line of sight and stares for a long time, and even though Will can’t see his expression he knows that it’s one of pure love. A rare sight from Jonathan, one Will had been on the receiving end of for years, one he would never squander and he hoped that Steve would never waste either.

“Hey,” Jonathan finally reaches out, hand resting on Steve’s shoulder and pulling gently. Steve turns his head, lips pursed and awkwardly as he looks the both of them. He gives a little half mouth smirk, and Will can’t help but smile. “Get over here; I didn’t say you could run away.” He jokes halfheartedly, not much attempt in it, but Steve smiles nonetheless.

“Sorry,” He places himself back in the bed, dropping back against a pillow with his hands behind his head. “Whatever you say, warden.” He teases gently, Jonathan huffs a quiet laugh and then drops down next to Steve. Will lies down and makes himself comfortable next to his brother, head resting on his arm.

“We probably shouldn’t leave mom alone,” Jonathan tells them quietly, Will turns his head and stares up at him. “How is she?”

He asks towards the ceiling, Will shrugs.

"Quiet... Waiting for Hopper to come back." He offers almost silently.

"How are you?" Jonathan questions, Will turns over onto his side. He rests his arm across his brother's chest, his fingers brush against Steve's arm and he finds it comforting to know that someone else was watching out for Jonathan. Sure, Steve might be a bit of a tool, but he was a goodhearted tool.

"I'll be okay," He says, optimistic as always. "What about you?" He murmurs, watching Jonathan's chest rise and fall slowly in the quiet.

"I think I'll be okay too." He finally says, sounding genuinely honest. "As long as I have you and mom," For some reason there's a pause, and Will interprets it as a heavy 'and Steve'. "I'll be fine."

"That's good," Will permits, smiling as his brother reaches up to ruffle his hair.

"I think it's about time we stop hiding in here. What do you say?" He asks, tipping his head to meet Will's eyes.

"The Byers don't hide, Jonny… They brood." Steve says with a smirk as he sits up, Jonathan scoffs and rolls his eyes as they

too sit up. “It’s true and you know it, it’s in your genes. A brooding batch of DNA.” He snorts; Jonathan smirks and pushes the older boy gently.

“What do the Harrington’s do then?” Will questions smartly, watching Steve’s eyebrows do a funny thing before he smiles charmingly.

“They woo, little man. The Harrington men woo until their target is swept off their feet and head over heels.” He grins; Will rolls his eyes and reaches over his brother’s legs to push at the older boy’s chest with a laugh.

“You’re such a cheeseball.” He snorts, and when Steve looks to Jonathan he nods.

“It’s true,” He agrees, but Steve doesn’t seem offended in the slightest. He simply continues smiling, eyes bright and happy.

“It’s just in my DNA.” He replies easily, and Jonathan shakes his head.

“No, it’s not.” He disagrees quietly, and when Steve frowns Jonathan pushes himself to the edge of the mattress. “That’s all you, Harrington.” He assures, Will climbs down and Steve stands. He watches the two hover closely, like planets orbiting one another.

“Sure you’re okay?” Steve asks, stepping closer into

Jonathan's space. His hand reaches out for Jonathan's, and for a moment Will holds his breath, expecting his brother to pull away. But Jonathan simply allows his hand to be taken into Steve's grasp, nodding his head.

"I'm fine," He repeats, then looks back at Will. "I think we have a monster to catch, what do you say?" He inquires, Will nods his head.

"It's going down," He agrees easily, Steve pumps a fist into the air.

"Monster Fighting Gang!" He cheers, Jonathan groans and Will snickers. He could still feel his father's death at the edge of his mind, but there was something else holding it back. Determination held strong, this thing would have to be taken down before someone else got hurt.

"Doesn't matter who it takes, it matters that it did." Will adds, and when Jonathan looks to him with a proud look in his eyes, he notices the odd expression on Steve's face. Almost as if Will had grown a second head, but then he looks away and shakes his head, almost as if dismissing a preposterous thought.

"You're right, buddy. We're gonna kill it." Jonathan assures, and Will feels a burst of confidence. They could do it, he knew that much.

-

“So Jonathan just fell over him?” Mike asks with unease, the idea of finding a body just in the woods made him never want to go back there. They sit in the front yard together, unable to stay inside where the Byers were doing an odd form of mourning for the man who often made their life more difficult than it already was.

They sat in a square, knees touching. Lucas sits on Mike’s right, Eleven is on his left, and Dustin across from him. Lucas was fiddling with the pockets on his pants and Dustin had his hat in his own fidgeting palms, but Eleven was still and silent, unusually sullen.

“I thought it was a pile of trash at first, but then I saw his face.” Dustin answers; he seems less enthused now that the entirety of it had set in.

“Was it after you found El?” Mike asks curiously, the girl glances over at him with an obvious amount of guilt in her eyes. And something occurs to him then, but he dare not speak such heinous accusations.

“No, we found her just after.” Dustin says, none the wiser, but Lucas is now looking at the girl once more. As if there were pieces of the puzzle starting to fit together.

“What was Will’s dad doing in town anyway?” Lucas questions, Mike shrugs his shoulders and stares down at his lap. Will had confided in him, he didn't know if he wanted his business blabbed to everyone. And Mike most definitely wouldn’t rat out Eleven with his theories and ideas, not until he got all the facts. Lucas hadn’t trusted her from the beginning; he didn’t want to cast out

random doubt now.

The front door of the house opens suddenly, and Will comes strutting out with purpose. He runs right up to the group as they all stand, he smiles a little wickedly. It was an odd expression on him, almost like the one he had when he'd slayed the Demogorgon during their basement quest the year before. And all the monsters since then, the look of pride and confidence, but also tainted with a little twisted malevolence.

“What’s with the grin, Freddy Kruger?” Dustin demands with a frown, it was a movie they weren’t allowed to see that he was referencing but it didn’t mean they hadn’t heard all about it.

“We’re gonna find it and kill it, who’s in?” He asks with a raise of his hands.

“The monster?” Lucas asks with shock, Will nods his head solemnly. “How? We couldn’t even handle the Demogorgon, this thing is shredding people!” He hisses, Will juts a thumb behind him towards the house.

“Jonathan and Steve have a plan, they’re gonna get Nancy in on it. They promised we can help as long as we don’t tell the Chief and my mom.” Will explains to them quietly, they all cast nervous glances to one another.

“Are you sure, Will?” Mike asks cautiously, feeling a little more confident when Will nods once more. “Then I’m in.” He turns to Eleven, who hasn’t said one word since they got back. “What about

you, El?" He asks, she frowns. "Do you want to kill the monster that's hurting people?" He reiterates, she seems to understand then and nods hesitantly.

"Dustin, Lucas?" Will says hopefully, the boys look to each other for a moment and then both give duel shrugs.

"I'm in," Lucas says casually, just as Dustin grins.

"Let's kick monster ass."

-

When Nancy returns with Jim from showing him the body, Steve and Jonathan are standing outside with their backs against the wall. She notes that Steve wasn't wearing his sling anymore, but instead had an old brace on his wrist. The boys gesture to Nancy and she looks to the Chief, who nods at her in approval.

"I'm gonna go call the station," He explains, she nods and they part ways.

She approaches the boys hesitantly; unsure as to how Jonathan was really taking his father's death. His emotions ranged from being completely ignored to becoming full-fledged outbursts, but despite his earlier fit, right now he seemed relatively calm.

“You doing okay?” She questions as she approaches, Jonathan nods and she reaches out to pull him into a hug. He hesitates only a moment before hugging her back gently, when they separate she notices how Steve is staring over near the back door. Not jealous, but occupied, as if he was keeping watch. “What are you two up to?” She asks quietly, Jonathan crosses his arms and clears his throat.

“We’re gonna find this thing and kill it,” He says softly, Nancy’s eyes widen.

“And how, pray tell, do you plan to do that?” She demands with a hiss. The last time they had done something to this degree, Jonathan had almost become monster food and Nancy had almost gotten killed herself. If it hadn’t been for Steve’s idiotic loyal bravery, they’d both be dead. Huh, another reason Jonathan and Steve really were a lot alike…

“I have a theory,” Steve interrupts; Jonathan nods his agreement and gesture to the older boy for effect. “The last monster was drawn by blood, what if this creature has a motive too?” He suggests hesitantly, Nancy glances to Jonathan once more, who’s staring at the ground as if lost in thought.

“What sort of motive?” She asks warily, Steve grimaces.

“Well, this morning Lonnie came over and he made a bit of a scene…” He tells her carefully, looking to Jonathan as if he might be stepping on a landmine, but the young man doesn’t speak. “He got into a fight with Jonathan, and then he hit Will.” He says with finality, and Nancy gasps softly.

“Oh my god, that’s terrible.” She looks to Jonathan, who seems a little miffed just at the memory.

“But you know, that Troy kid had spent years bullying Will.” Steve adds suddenly, and Nancy frowns in thought. A coincidence perhaps, but was it really?

“You don’t think…” Nancy insinuates, but Steve nods slowly. “But Will isn’t…” She shakes her head; Steve joins her in the gesture.

“No, of course not. But you know, Jonathan saw the monster right after he locked Will in his room.” Nancy feels the puzzle pieces connect then, how had she not seen this before? How could Steve have realized this himself, she didn’t think he was an idiot but he surely wasn’t observant enough to figure all this out. Of course, most of this had to do with Will, and therefor Jonathan as well. He had been paying so much attention to Jonathan that he had put the pieces together.

“So you think something is attacking people that hurt Will?” She asks cautiously, and when she turns her eyes to Jonathan he’s staring at her with a completely serious expression. It had made sense to him too; and the idea that something was attached to his baby brother had scared him to the core.

“Yeah, which means we have to set a trap with Will in the middle.” Steve says gravely, and Nancy can’t take her eyes off of Jonathan, who hasn’t faltered. He knew what they had to do, which meant he wanted to be in the middle with his little brother.

“Do you have a plan?” Nancy questions, Steve grimaces in the slightest and she knows the answer must be ‘not much of one’. “All right, well I’ve got one.” She nods confidently.

“That’s why you’re team leader of the Monster Hunting Gang, Nance.” Steve grins; she rolls her eyes and steps closer to the boys.

“We’re gonna need some rope, a pulley, a lot of gas and another bear trap... Maybe two.” She tells them, Jonathan makes a face and Steve only seems more excited.

“This thing is so toast, it messed with the wrong people!” He bumps his shoulder against Jonathan’s, smiling brightly. Fear rarely touched Steve, and when it did, he still pushed it away. It was easier for him to battle things with a smile, a grin, and he was dedicated to this purpose. In the heat of the moment, he proved to be worth the time and effort, all of that silly stupidity washed away to show a brave young man with a heart of gold. Well, maybe silver, he was still kind of an ass.

“I’m guessing we aren’t telling the Chief,” Nancy says with a deadpan, the boys shake their heads with slight guilt in their expressions. “Well then we’re going to need all the kids.” She says with a shrug.

“As long as they’re out of the line of fire,” Jonathan says firmly, she nods her head.

“No, because Will is the catalyst. You’re going to be the bait.” She points a finger at Jonathan, Steve’s mouth opens to protest and Nancy shoots a glare at him. “Don’t pull all that protective crap either; we’re all in danger for this one. So unless you want to go inside and tell Hopper, we’re doing this my way.” She says sternly, keeping her stance strong and her gaze steady until he withers against it.

“Fine, but he’d better have a weapon.” He mutters.

“Not a problem.” She shrugs, turns and heads around the side of the house. They had a lot work to do, and nobody knew how much time they had. They had to work quick and without suspicion, with precision and without hesitation. They would kill this thing; Nancy would make sure of it.

-

“Look, you have to understand… The deal that I made with those men was to keep everyone safe, I’m not working with them because I want to.” Jim tries to explain to Eleven, who was currently attached to Joyce’s side.

After he had called the station, taken statements from the kids, and had the body hauled off to the morgue, he’d decided to approach the girl. Jonathan, Steve, and Nancy were taking the kids back to their homes and then the older boys were getting their cars from the school parking lot. So after the house is empty, all he’s got to do now is convince Eleven to come back home with him.

“Bad man.” She says with a scowl, holding onto Joyce’s shirt and practically hiding behind her.

“Honey, I would never allow someone to hurt you.” Joyce interrupts; the girl looks up at her with wide and wary doe eyes. Joyce crouches down onto her level, hands gentle on her shoulders and voice lowering to a quiet sincere tone. “Hopper is the most trustworthy person I know. He knows what he’s doing, and he’d never hurt you or let those men get ahold of you again. You aren’t going anywhere; we’re going to figure this out.” She promises, watching the girl’s eyes shift over to Hopper cautiously.

“Why?” She asks softly, Jim frowns and joins Joyce, kneeling in front of the girl.

“Why, what?” He whispers, reaching out carefully and taking her tiny hand into his palm. He watches tears gather in her eyes, glistening as they scan over his face.

“Why… work with bad men?” She asks carefully, he sighs and squeezes her little hand gently, dropping his head to stare down at the rugged carpet.

“When it comes down to it, you always have a choice to make in life. Sometimes the choices you’re given, none of them work exactly the way you want them to. So you have to choose the one you think you can make work the best,” He explains as simply as he can, the girl frowns even harder.

“Why choose?” She mutters.

“Because I had a bunch of people to keep safe, and just today I was promised by the bad men that you’ll be okay.” He nods his head, sure of himself. “You, your friends, Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy, Steve… They’ll all be okay, as long as I keep my promises.” He explains.

“Promises…” Eleven repeats quietly, nodding her head. “Friends protect friends.” She tells him, he nods his head.

“Yeah, you protect the people you love and care about. “ He agrees quietly, she seems to contemplate his words, weighing his honesty with the problems he’d presented with before. The girl glances back at Joyce for a moment with hesitancy, before looking to Hopper once more.

“We… Come back tomorrow?” She questions, he grins as Joyce chuckles softly. He looks to the woman for permission, who nods her head without pause.

“Yeah kiddo, I’ll bring you back here tomorrow and you can play with the boys.” He permits, she smiles softly and steps forward to wrap her arms around Jim’s neck and hugging him gently. He can’t help but think about Sarah in that moment, and he has to swallow against a lump in his throat as he stares at Joyce. The woman looks absolutely content with the image, and he feels content at the idea of keeping this little girl safe. She wasn’t his daughter, but he’d do anything to help her.

-

The next few days are actually encroaching on normal, well their version of normal anyway. The kids whisper about them in the hallway, the teachers give the three of them dirty looks and there's a general feel of unease around the town of Hawkins. Eleven stays with Jim for a while, and meets up with the boys after school most days.

It would almost be classified as peaceful if it weren't for the blatantly obvious white vans parked at their schools and their houses. Classes went on, Jonathan worked, Nancy studied, and Steve did… whatever Steve did… But sometimes they'd take some time out of their day to gather essentials, little things slowly compiling for their plan as Nancy mapped it out.

The funeral was the next time they really saw one another outside of school. They conspired over the phone but Nancy didn't really see either of them other than at lunch on occasion or in class. The sky above is littered with clouds and threatening rain, the ground is slightly damp and the air smells of fresh dirt. It reminds her all too much of Barb's funeral, and she takes a moment to remind herself that this wasn't that situation.

Jonathan was dressed in an old suit that seemed just a little too small on him; one he wore at his brother's funeral. He had on his regular ratty sneakers, which threw off the outfit entirely. His tie was slightly crooked and he kept messing with it, couldn't drag his eyes from the ground. Will seemed sullen in his little dress shirt and jeans, they had buried the fake body with a nice little tux, but it was most likely his only suit. Joyce was dressed in a light brown coat and dark pants; they looked nice, but not really made for a funeral. She kept eerily still, while her boys were shifting restlessly and Jonathan's fingers wouldn't stop fidgeting.

There weren't that many people at the funeral, which she realizes shouldn't have been a surprise, he wasn't a popular fellow. There were maybe a handful of people, which really made Nancy analyze her own life and choices. How much would you have to screw up to have nobody show up to your funeral?

After Lonnie Byers is six feet under, Jonathan finds Nancy and Steve near the cars. He looks tired, like the day after he'd stumbled upon Troy's body. He rubs at his eyes; they seem a bit red, not like he'd been crying, more like he'd been pulling all-nighters. Just like with Steve, she cared a lot for Jonathan, even though they hadn't really known each other for long. But at the same time, she knew that his time of emotional frailty would come to an end, he'd trudge forward and never give up.

"Hey," Nancy pulls him into a hug, noticing the odd way he jumped a little at the contact. Probably had been drinking coffee, which probably wasn't the best idea for a kid that startled at the smallest noises. It would make him hypervigilant, aware of everything even more, he most likely just needed some rest.

"When can we do it?" Jonathan murmurs, glancing around as if making sure nobody was listening. Of course, rest was the farthest thing from his mind during this. Even with his twisted and mangled relationship with his father, he felt responsible for killing this creature. He wanted to protect everyone around him, he had the heart of a hero who could do anything. The only problem was that he had the body of a hyper-anxious teenaged boy and the mentality of one who overestimated his abilities.

"Soon, are you free today?" She asks to the both of them,

they both nod and she feels the pieces starting to come together. It wouldn't be long now, tomorrow, the next day at the latest. "Gentlemen, start your engines." She smirks, Steve offers a small smile and Jonathan turns his head to watch Joyce and Will stand with the other boys and a few of their parents. Joyce talks with them quietly, just as the boys share a few hugs and reassuring smiles. Eventually the other boys retreat with their parents, leaving only Joyce and Will left.

Joyce approaches the teens, her arm around her youngest boy's shoulders and her head held high. She looked mildly distracted; Nancy wondered if part of her still cared for Lonnie. She stops right in front of them, Will steps a little further and Jonathan places a hand on his head as he passes to stand in between his older brother and Steve.

"Jonathan, could you take Will back home? I'm going out with Jim for a bit and then heading into work." Joyce asks him, the young man nods. "Thank you for coming, kids." She nods to Nancy and Steve respectfully, Nancy smiles gently and Steve gives her a half-salute with one of his hands. She turns to walk away, leaving them in the dreary cemetery almost completely alone.

"Has she asked you about what happened at the facility?" Nancy says quietly as she watches Joyce climb into her car, Jonathan and Will nod their heads. "What'd you tell her?" She asks.

"Just that they asked us some vague questions and told us to stay out of everything." Will answers with a shrug; Nancy hums quietly in understanding and folds her arms together. They wanted Jim and Joyce as far out of the loop as possible, if they didn't know about the plan they couldn't interfere.

They watch the woman retreat, the few people who attended slowly leave in their cars, and soon it's only the teens and Will standing at the edge of a graveyard while rain begins to sprinkle down in a light mist. Jonathan hasn't moved, is simply standing and staring at the ground as the others look at him. Eventually, he takes in a deep breath and sighs, hands slipping into his pockets.

"Why didn't Hopper show up?" Nancy asks, Will looks up at Jonathan, as if he didn't know the answer either. Jonathan shrugs his shoulders uncomfortably, glancing about the cemetery restlessly.

"I dunno, I guess he just didn't like my dad. None of us did, really." He mutters, Will makes a face and adjusts his jacket with an expression of guilt. Nancy can easily tell that Jonathan is avoiding the truth, whatever that may be. Steve seems to be making the same conclusion, because after an unconvinced look towards Nancy, he clears his throat.

"So what are we gonna do about the interdimensional creepy crawly terrorizing us?" He asks, Jonathan's eyes flicker over his face and he sighs almost in relief before looking to his little brother.

"Will, did you tell your friends what's up?" He asks in a whisper, as if breaking out of a low decibel might fracture the reality around them.

"Yeah, they're on board. How are we gonna kill it?" He inquires curiously; Jonathan simply turns on his heel and starts walking to the car. He walks to the passenger seat and pulls out a box

of matches, shaking it to let the matches rattle inside together.

"Fire worked last time," He says, Nancy nods her head, but then frowns.

"Shouldn't we use a lighter?" She questions as they walk over to Jonathan's vehicle to get closer, he shakes his head.

"No, definitely not." He says firmly, sticking the box in his jacket pocket.

"Why?" Will asks, Jonathan makes a face and shakes his head again.

"Because I said so." When Nancy looks to Steve, he's oddly quiet, staring at Jonathan with a sort of soft and shocked look on his face. She decides that it's not a problem to dwell on, matches would work. She didn't have a right to pry on Jonathan and Steve's secrets, just as they didn't with hers.

-

They get back to the house, Jonathan instructs Will to bring Nancy around back to look at the supplies in the shed and make sure they had everything they needed. After they disappear around the house, Jonathan and Steve head inside. Jonathan sets his keys on the table near the door, running his hands through his hair with a tired sigh.

“Thanks, for the lighter thing.” Steve says suddenly, Jonathan turns around with a slow nod. “It’s stupid, I know.” He mutters, crossing his arms with a vulnerable expression on his face. Jonathan steps closer to him and rests his hands on Steve’s waist.

“It’s not stupid, it’s important to you so it’s important to me. We can’t let this go wrong, and you having a panic attack in the middle of the plan will definitely cause problems.” He smirks when he’s suddenly gripped in a tight hug, wrapping his arms around Steve’s waist and squeezing him gently. Steve had confided in him at the news of having to use fire once more that the sound of a lighter clicking open had become a bit of an irritant to him. He’d break down and hyperventilate and generally fall apart at just the sound.

But Jonathan understood, because the smell of smoke and gasoline now made him nauseous and on edge. It was little things, things that reminded them of the night with the monster. Jonathan didn’t quite understand it himself but he knew Steve related to him similarly. They had promised to place some Vapor-Rub gel on their upper lip before they put the plan together, just to ensure neither of them lost their confidence during the attack.

“Come on, we got a monster to kill.” Jonathan pulls apart from Steve, who nods his head and smiles halfheartedly. He looked rather handsome today, in a nice dress shirt and blazer with his hair combed to perfection as usual. It was starting to get long in the back, but Jonathan didn’t really mind it, he kind of looked good with it.

“We still need jackets.” Steve says with good humor, Jonathan smirks.

“Should have written it down, maybe next time.” He jokes; Steve shakes his head with a rather exhausted sigh.

“I’d rather there not be a next time.” He says a little more seriously, and Jonathan can’t help but agree with a quiet noise. “But I guess we can handle anything as long as we got each other.” Steve reaches out and pokes Jonathan in the chest, who swats his hand away with a scoff.

“You’re the epitome of a cliché.” He mutters, turning away and heading into the kitchen when he hears the back door open. He laughs when Steve runs up behind him and crowds against him, making him stumble forward. “Stop it, you asshole!” He snorts, reaching back and grabbing at the back of Steve’s neck, pushing his feet hard into the floor in an attempt to hold him back.

“I’ll show you a cliché, Byers.” Steve wraps his arms under Jonathan’s and lifts him up, forcing him to rest his heels on Steve’s toes. “Left, right, left, right. We are Stevathan Hyers, a mutant hybrid.” He snickers as he presses his chest to Jonathan’s back, the younger stands still as Steve maneuvers them forward in robotic movements, unable to take the grin off of his face.

“You’re an idiot.” Jonathan laughs quietly, gripping Steve’s arms around his waist as Steve takes heavy swinging steps so he doesn’t lose his grip on the smaller boy. It’s a stupid and silly gesture, one that’s pointless and immature, and yet Jonathan can’t help but enjoy it. That was the best thing about Steve, his ability to help anyone forget their worries for even just a few moments.

“Will you two stop goofing around?” Nancy smirks at them when they step into the kitchen, Jonathan steps off of Steve’s feet and

adjusts his jacket. “The supplies are all there, all we need is a good place to do it. We’ll find it tomorrow, any objections?” She asks, the boys all shake their heads.

“We aren’t gonna put another burn spot on our carpet are we?” Will asks with a grimace, they all make similar expressions at the memory of the fire and the smoke, the sound of the fire extinguisher and the rancid smell of gas and smoke that kept them from going back inside for hours. Nancy shakes the memories from her head with a sigh, patting the boy’s shoulder.

“No, we need a tall tree with a thick branch for this one.” She promises, and he nods pensively.

“So we have to search the creepy woods for a special tree so we can set a trap for a mystical murdering creature. This is feeling more and more like a Dungeons and Dorks adventure.” Steve snorts, Will shoots him a glare and he holds up his hands in surrender. “Sorry.” He murmurs.

“I think I know where we can get a tree like that.” Will says hesitantly, they all look to him in surprise. “I can take you there if you want.” He suggests, Nancy purses her lips and looks to the boys for approval.

“Yeah, we can get a lay of the land before we do anything.” Jonathan says reasonably, but then frowns. “Go change, you’ll ruin your good clothes.” He reaches out and grabs Will’s shoulder gently, ushering him towards the hallway.

“Okay,” The boy agrees, hurrying off down the hall and into his room. Jonathan wrings his hands anxiously, Nancy watches his eyes fall to the floor and his bangs become a sort of curtain to hide his expression. The three teens are quiet for a few minutes; Jonathan strips off his jacket and presses his hands against his face.

“We don’t have to today,” Nancy offers, but Jonathan simply sighs and pulls his hands away.

“I’m fine, just tired.” He says quietly, Will returns in a rattier pair of washed jeans and a dark blue jacket, a beige colored piece of clothing tucked under his arm. He offers it to Jonathan with a small smile, who takes it.

“Shouldn’t ruin your good clothes,” He repeats to his older brother, who smirks and sets his jacket aside to slip what Nancy now realizes is a cream colored sweater over his head.

“All right, let’s go.” He puts his hand on the back of Will’s neck, and Steve opens the back door, holding it open for all of them.

-

“How are the boys?” Jim questions as they sit in the parking lot of the donut shop, drinking coffee with a small box of donuts between them. He turns his eyes from the windshield to watch the woman sip at the coffee cupped between her hands. She was quieter than usual, not sad but distracted. Jim would have gone to the funeral if Joyce had needed him to, but he didn't believe in attending the funeral of someone you disliked. No, not disliked, more

like loathed... But that was besides the point, a man shouldn't lay hands on kids, simple as that. Jim had stayed at the station with El that morning during the funeral, and afterwards Mike Wheeler and his mother had swung by and picked up the girl.

They were going to teach her how to play some game, and they'd promised to stay inside so he'd agreed. He still didn't trust the men he was working with, and for good reason. They were twisted, conniving, and had no concern for anyone outside of themselves.

"As far as I know, Will's been okay..." She says quietly, sighing as she settles her coffee on her leg and props her arm up on the car window frame to settle her head against her hand. "But I woke up this morning and Jonathan was in the clothes I saw him come home in yesterday." She murmurs, staring out of the window.

"Think he's still drinking?" He asks hesitantly, afraid to step on slippery edges of certain aspects of her life. Sure, they were technically seeing each other, but you didn't point fingers at another person's kids.

"I locked the liquor cabinet and he has to give me his car keys every evening." She tells Jim with a gesture of her coffee before she sips from it again. "And his friends are more worried about him than trying to get him drunk… Maybe he's just dealing with a lot, but I don't know." She whispers sadly, voice thick with emotion.

"Maybe he could see a therapist... Or a doctor… I mean, he's seen two dead bodies within about a week, not to mention one was his father. That would take a toll on anyone, let alone a teenager." He says reasonably, the woman looks at him as if she might protest, but he continues on. "Take it from me, Joyce, once

you hit a certain point it's hard to bounce back. Drinking is just the beginning, if he doesn't get help, it'll only get worse." He murmurs.

"I know that, don't you think I know that?" Joyce exclaims, angry, but not at him. "I've heard it all, about drinking and drugs and gangs. But it's not just that, there's something wrong, I can feel it in my gut." She lowers her voice when it trembles, shaking her head gently and glancing down at her lap. "I woke up this morning and he was sitting on the couch staring at the TV, his face was just, blank. I know that doesn't sound that bad, but my baby boy looked like he was in a waking coma." She sets her coffee cup down and wrings her hands. "He was staring at the TV, Hop, but it was turned off." She hisses.

"He's going through a lot; it's just exhaustion and trauma. After all this is over, he'll get back to normal. Just get him a therapist; they'll probably give him some sleeping pills or something." He explains hurriedly. "He'll start sleeping again, hang out with his friends, everything will be fine." He reassures her; she nods and takes in a deep breath.

"Maybe you're right..." She admits quietly, giving a long sigh and running a hand through her messy hair. "I'll look into some things, for both of them." She promises, Jim reaches over and wraps an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to kiss her gently. "It's just after everything that happened with Will, I can't do it again… He was so hurt, so broken; it's hard to see that." She whispers, he nods his head.

"It'll be okay," He promises, running a hand over her hair and kissing her head gently. "You'll see, everything will work out."

-

“I haven’t been out here in a long time, it’s beautiful.” Nancy says, almost breathlessly as they walk through the tall trees and deeper into the woods. Jonathan hadn’t been out here since Will went missing, before that, maybe for a few minutes when he fetched the younger boy for dinner. He hadn’t really spent time out here since he was around thirteen, which felt like eons ago.

“It’s hard to enjoy when we found a dead body out here, and we know that the Dema-goo-goo’s big brother is out here shredding civilians.” Steve states cynically, but with a tinge of humor to his tone. Jonathan glances over at him, arms tucked together and hands shoved into his underarms. He was obviously nervous, Jonathan couldn’t really blame him, he himself felt unnerved just stepping through the towering trees. This place was creepy once you’d seen man-eating monsters and corpses.

“Demogorgon.” Will corrects him, Steve makes a face and reaches out to poke the boy in the back of the head. “Hey!” He laughs, turning his head back and swatting his hand at the air where Steve’s hand was.

“I don’t care about what it’s called. I’ll call the Dema-who’s-it whatever I want to call it.” He waves a hand and almost simultaneously both Will and Steve stick their tongues out at one another.

“Separate, children.” Nancy scolds teasingly; Jonathan snorts and pushes at Steve, who pushes back gently.

“Y’know they say boys push their crushes,” Steve smirks; Jonathan huffs and pushes him again.

“They need better ways to express their feelings, you’re just annoying me.” He says in response, Steve lingers a little closer with a raised eyebrow.

“You’re going to tell people how to express their feelings?” He asks skeptically, Jonathan rolls his eyes and the boy snickers. “I’m kidding, don’t hate me.” He tugs on Jonathan’s sweater hem gently; Jonathan pulls the older boy’s fingers from the fabric and twines his own through them to quiet him.

“We almost there, Will?” He calls ahead, the boy glances back at him, slowing in his pace a bit as his eyes lock onto Jonathan and Steve’s clasped hands. Jonathan feels Steve’s hand loosen, but when he tries to pull away, Jonathan holds tight. Will simply glances back up to his brother’s face and nods his head, lips twitching up just in the slightest, not in humor but gentle happiness as he turns away.

“Jonathan, did you ever play out here as a kid?” Nancy questions from a few feet ahead, looking back at them. She doesn’t even do a second glance at their joined hands, and if she does, there’s no pause of awkward staring.

“Yeah, I was out here whenever I could be… But sometimes other kids came back here, and they didn’t like me hanging around while they were playing.” He shrugs his shoulders, glancing away towards his feet and the ground.

“One time they pushed him out of a tree.” Will adds, voice cold and accusing towards Jonathan’s previous attackers. Jonathan kicks his foot out gently and knocks the toe of his shoe against his little brother’s calf, the boy looks back at him with an innocent expression and Jonathan throws him a glare.

“They scared me, I fell.” He amends, Nancy doesn’t look back at him, and Steve is staring down at the ground forlornly. “Besides, I never wanted to hang out with them anyways… All they ever wanted to play was pirates,” He rolls his eyes, Steve glances over at him and Jonathan offers a reassuring smile.

“What, you wanted to play knights instead?” He asks, gaining some of his good humor once more.

“No, I liked playing prince and princess. Of course kids always thought it was weird when I wanted to be the prince in distress.” He snorts, Steve’s face splits into a grin in response and Will and Nancy laugh loudly. “But I digress, I was no pirate. I’m a far more refined human being.” He says jokingly, Steve squeezes his hand and smiles.

“Of course,” He agrees quietly.

“Here we go!” Will calls suddenly, hurrying ahead and stopping under a large tree with huge branches. “Mike and I used to imagine this was a tree man that was our guardian.” He explains as the teens all crane their necks up to view the entire tree. The air was turning foggy from the mist and the cloudy sky, creating a very eerie vibe. The mist was coming down a little heavier, dampening all of their clothes.

“This is the creepiest tree I’ve ever seen.” Steve states simply, Will pushes his hip and the older boy laughs quietly. “Sorry to your imaginary tree friend, but it’s true.” He murmurs, looking around. “Everything around here is creepy; I’m just telling it like it is.” He spins in a slow circle, giving an over exaggerated shudder. “Can we get out of here?”

“Let me look around, I need to plan this out.” Nancy says with a gesture of her hand, Jonathan nods his head. Steve walks up behind him and wraps his arms over Jonathan’s shoulders and around his neck.

“You scared?” Jonathan asks mockingly, Steve reaches up and pinches Jonathan’s cheek. The younger boy smacks his hand away, resting both of them on Steve’s arms around him. Nancy is doing rounds about the tree, observing the land surrounding it.

“So you’re like...” Will’s voice draws their eyes away from Nancy, the boy is shifting awkwardly. “Boyfriends, right?” He questions, Jonathan turns his head with a raised eyebrow at Steve.

“Boyfriends, sounds cheesy.” Steve offers with a giggle, Jonathan smirks.

“Would you rather lovers?” He inquires jokingly, Steve grimaces and then lets Jonathan go.

“Boyfriend is good.” He permits, and Jonathan nods and

sinks his thumbs into his jean pockets.

"Yeah, that okay?" He asks Will, even though he's pretty sure it won't bother him. They might have been teased all their lives, called fags and queers and whatever other bullshit people could think of, but it only gave them compassion to those different from the norm.

"Definitely." Will agrees, nodding his head. "As long as Steve stops being a dick." He grins, Jonathan gives a startled laugh and Steve shakes his head insistently.

"Maybe when hell freezes over, little man." He reaches out, ruffling the boy's hair and then pushing him away by the head.

"Hey!" Will rushes forward and latches onto the older boy's arm, falling limp and dragging him partially downwards. Steve makes a yelp of a noise and staggers; Jonathan can't help but grin as Steve tries to remove Will, who struggles to hang on tight.

"Let me go, you little monkey!" Steve laughs then, falling back on his ass and bringing Will down with him. Will rolls away with a bright smile, sitting up and panting quietly. Jonathan turns his eyes back to Nancy, who's watching them all with amusement sparkling in her eyes.

"Can we use it?" Jonathan questions, Nancy nods her head.

“It should work, but I think we might need a ladder.” She says quietly, giving a thoughtful look to the tall tree before them. “I’ll work it all out, trust me.”

“I do…” Jonathan promises, clearing his throat and stepping a little closer. “So when can we do this?” The girl frowns at him, then over at the tree.

“How about next Friday?” She suggests, he looks back at Steve and Will, who shrug their shoulders and nod their heads respectively.

“Friday sounds good.” Jonathan agrees, crossing his arms. “C’mon, let’s get out of here before it starts raining.” He mutters before turning and offering Steve a hand up. They begin to walk back; Jonathan can’t help but glance back every few minutes, feeling that somehow they were being watched.

-

Jonathan tests the hold of the makeshift harness attached to him, nerves a tangled and unrecognizable mess as he pats his jacket pocket to feel the match box there. He glances over at the boys, who were going over the plan with Nancy and Eleven. The young girl seemed extremely unnerved by the entire thing, but she hadn’t said a word and hadn’t offered any resistance. He still hadn't figured out if Eleven had killed his father, or the monster... It seemed too malicious to be her, but she was a surprise in itself, so who knew? He wasn't going to ask most likely, he'd rather let it die with Lonnie, move on. He didn't want to cause unnecessary drama.

It was getting late, the sun beginning to set. All they needed now was to summon the beast and destroy it. It was the plan itself that made Jonathan's stomach churn, he hated this plan, but he supposed it was the best bet they had.

"Gas is all set," Steve mutters as he approaches Jonathan, the infamous nail filled bat propped on his shoulder. There are still a few blood stains on it, to think that a bat had saved his life was funny in a way. "Are you ready?" He questions, holding out the bat. Jonathan takes it, testing its weight in his hand before slipping it in the ropes of his harness so his hands are free.

"I think so…" He sighs, glancing over to the kids, more specifically at Will. "I don't know if I can hurt him." He whispers, Steve follows his line of sight and frowns.

"Just think about it as helping him, you get this thing away from him." He tells Jonathan softly, who nods slowly and runs his hand through his hair. "Okay, hold this for me." He kisses Jonathan, who smiles softly. "You can give it back later." He explains as Jonathan chuckles and nods his head.

"Okay, will do." He agrees, squeezing Steve's hand and turning as Nancy approaches.

"I guess we're ready." She gives Jonathan a significant look, and he nods his head. "Oh shoot," She says suddenly, looking around. "I forgot Steve's pocket knife back at the house." She says frantically, Steve and Jonathan look to each other.

“Well, it’s okay…” Steve says with a shrug, then gestures to Will. “Will, could you go get it?” He asks, the boy nods his head and then hurries off towards the house.

“Okay, new plan.” Nancy looks to the other kids as soon as Will is out of sight, the boys blink at her in surprise. “Jonathan’s still the bait, but Will is connected to the monster. There’s a lot to explain and not a lot of time, so just wait for your cue and help Steve pull Jonathan into the air.” She tells them simply, they all look to one another before Mike nods hesitantly.

“We’re not gonna hurt him, right?” Lucas questions, and Nancy sighs with a glance back at the older boys with a bit of an exasperated look.

“Jonathan has to upset him to get the monster to come, it’s protecting him. Just don’t interfere, wait for your cue.” She tells them firmly, they hesitate with responding. “Okay?” She demands, they all nod hurriedly. “Okay, let’s do this.” She murmurs, turning around just as Will comes racing back.

“Here you go, Nancy.” He drops the knife in her palm, smiling brightly. “Let’s do this.” Nancy turns and tosses the knife to Jonathan, who catches it and slips it into his jean pocket.

“Okay, just a second.” Jonathan says, gesturing the young man closer. He glances to Nancy, who steps aside towards the tree trunk. “I just wanted…” Jonathan takes hold of Will’s shirt gently, barely glancing beyond to where Steve was inching the other kids back near the edge of the bushes. “I just wanted to tell you something.” He says hesitantly, Will looks up at him with confusion, eyes wide and innocent.

“Okay?” Will gestures for him to continue; Jonathan grits his teeth and snags a hand in the boy’s shirt collar. “Jonathan!” The boy yelps, Jonathan turns his head and brings his hand down on him with a harsh noise. His hand stings as he allows the boy to drop to the ground, eyes on the boy’s shocked and fearful expression.

“You’re useless!” He snarls, watching Will’s face crumple in confusion and pain. “You’re the reason dad’s dead, it’s all your fault!” He shouts, voice shaking and body trembling with the implications of his words.

“Shut up, that’s not true.” Will shakes his head, slowly getting to his feet.

“It is, even mom thinks so.” He nods his head, the boy’s face screws up into a scowl.

“Screw you!” He snaps, reaching out and shoving Jonathan.

There’s a moment of quiet, the only noise being Will sniffling and stepping backwards away from Jonathan and the birds in the trees. Jonathan feels sick to his stomach, and at first he thinks it’s just from guilt, but then he feels that same faintness from before. He takes in a few deep breaths, focusing his energy on the plan.

“How could you say something like that?” Will wipes at his

face, balling his hands into fists. There's an 'I'm sorry' stuck in his throat, right on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't say it. He'd understand soon, soon.

There's a distant groan, almost like a warble, and then a hiss of a noise.

Will looks in the direction of the noise with wide eyes, and then he turns his gaze onto Jonathan, as if putting the pieces together.

"Go with Steve," He murmurs, the boy shakes his head frantically. "Go!" He commands, the boy scrambles away just as the tall creature rises from the foliage beyond. It's even more gruesome in the light, like a giant spider that's been exposed to radioactive waste. Instead of little stubs at the end of its many legs, there were those three toed claws with razor sharp talons. He still had the healing scab from the previous catch; he didn't want a repeat of that incident because surely he'd never get so lucky again.

Its body and legs have little glistening hair follicles, its dark gray skin greasy with mucus. The multiple sets of piercing black eyes focus on Jonathan quickly, mouth cracking open to reveal a few rows of fangs. It's far taller than he remembers, which is definitely a problem considering his escape plan has to do with being lifted out of the way.

"Oh shit," He whispers, feeling weak in the knees as the thing begins to creep towards him. "Go!" He calls, the breath getting knocked out of him as he's yanked off the ground and into the air. The creature swipes at him with those claws and narrowly misses him as he's tugged further into the air. He struggles frantically, grabbing

onto the branch above him when he reaches the top of the pulley.

The creature rises up on its legs and Jonathan lifts his lower body to latch his legs onto the branch. He's just out of reach, staring down at the monster felt like some sort of fever dream. He feels the weight of the matches shifting, and he lets go of the branch just as the box falls out of his pocket. His body jerks and spins on the rope as he watches the box tumble to the ground in his blind reaching, spilling out on the grass underneath the monster's legs.

"No!" He hisses with his body hanging awkwardly and his arms still stretched out.

Nancy races out with the bucket of gas just as the matches hit the ground, her eyes widen and she freezes. The monster turns its head and one of its limbs fly across and smacks into her, she falls back, the bucket spilling all over her and the ground off of the target. The monster still hadn't stepped in the bear trap, and even if it did it could probably snap the thing right off.

"Fuck!" Jonathan shouts, just as the creature turns and connects the pulley to the rope and along towards the edge of the bushes where the kids were with Steve. "Run!" He demands, the pulley doesn't slacken, he struggles against the harness. He couldn't see the kids or Steve but he knew they were on the other end of that rope, and soon so would the creature. It wanted him, if it had him, it wouldn't go after anyone else.

He frantically tugs at the rope and the pulley, his legs kicking as he tries to increase his weight to snap the branch. He remembers the knife suddenly, scrambling to pull it from his pocket and beginning to cut the cord on his harness. He was probably about

fifteen feet off the ground, so this would definitely hurt.

The cord gives way and he shimmies out of the harness, grasping at the ropes as he lowers himself a little. The monster plants a leg down on the rope, tugging Steve and the kids into view and jostling Jonathan in the process. He swings himself back and forth, arms aching and palms slippery, all he needed was a little bit of rhythm. The boys start screaming at the top of their lungs, it would be only seconds before the creature took them all out. He aims for the monster's back, his arms strain to hold on, weak but

"Jonathan, no!" Nancy shouts, and he meets Steve's eyes just as he swings himself back once more and then as soon as he goes forward he lets go and sails towards the monster with something akin to a war cry.

-

Steve realizes the plan has gone to shit the second the monster yanks them from the bushes and he spots Nancy on the ground covered in gasoline. He had heard Jonathan demanding them to release the pulley, but truthfully he didn't know how bad it was until he was face to face with a ten foot tall monster with giant spider legs.

He freezes, which is definitely not a safe response, but he can't help it. The monster clicks and warbles, leaning in on them. All of the boys start screaming, Steve's eyes trail up to the tree when Nancy shouts for Jonathan, and they lock eyes before he swings forward down onto the monster.

Jonathan slams into its back and slips down its slimy vertebrae, the creature screeches and spins in a circle. Jonathan's legs flail about as he tries to pull himself back up, the nail bat clatters to the ground near a pile of matches. Steve looks back at the kids, then to the creature, and back. Mike and Will stand at the head, all of them wide eyed and terrified. They're all clinging to Mike, who looks just as lost himself. Steve couldn't make them do this, they'd seen enough.

"Run, do not come back no matter what you hear." He demands, Will shakes his head in a panic and Steve hears Jonathan shout before there's a thud. He turns his head, spotting Jonathan rolling on the ground with his back to the ground. The monster howls, rearing its legs up and making a high pitched scream of a noise.

Steve races through the creature's long tree trunk like legs and grabs ahold of the bat. He hauls it back and swings it forward right into a joint of one of the legs. The monster staggers and whines, its head twists downwards to look at him.

"Oh god." He pants, taking off in a zig zag motion through the limbs, avoiding getting talons stuck through him. "Shit, shit, shit!" He curses as he dodges another one by tumbling to the ground, he turns his head and spots Jonathan sitting up in a daze.

The monster seems to spot him as well; a limb knocks into Steve and sends him sprawling through the bushes and into a tree trunk. The air knocked from his lungs and his body caught up in branches and twigs, he coughs breathlessly and tries to pull himself out.

“No!” That’s Will; Steve falls from the shrubs and locks eyes on the boy. Little Will Byers kneeling in front of his older brother, arms spread wide in a protective stance. “Leave him alone!” He demands, voice shaking and face pale.

Jonathan seems all right, sitting up and looking shocked and fearful, one hand on his little brother’s shoulder and still sitting on the ground where he had landed. The monster towers over them, claws poised to attack, but not moving, not lunging forward.

Steve turns his head, finding Nancy just a few feet away soaked in gasoline and looking just as surprised as Steve. The world is quiet, the sun is disappearing beyond the horizon and a giant man-eating monster is towering over two brothers like the shadow of the grim reaper.

“What are you doing?” A voice demands, everyone begins looking around in confusion. At first Steve thinks it might be one of the other boys considering he was looking directly at Will, but they seem puzzled as well. A young boy appears from behind the tree, stalking over to where Will and Jonathan sit before the monster.

He has pale milky skin, his clothes are torn and ragged, but he looks to be younger than even Will. He shows no fear approaching, in fact he pays no attention to the monster and instead looks to the Byers in accusation.

“W-Who…” Will shakes his head in confusion, voice trembling a little.

“You think you can trick me? You think you’re smarter than me?” He asks angrily, tiny white fists clenched at his sides. “You’re trying to ruin everything!” The boy waves a hand and Will goes flying a few feet away, Jonathan goes to stand and the little boy casts another hand in his direction and he’s slammed back down into a sitting position. “I didn’t say you could move.” He snaps.

“Who are you?” Steve questions as he steps closer to all of them and taking the time to make sure to go around the monster. It was still, drool slipping from its mouth and slime glistening all over it.

“You started this,” The boy says as he turns to Steve, he looks around ten years old, with scraggly blonde hair and sunken in eyes. He looked like a corpse, so pale and without color, dirtied to hell. “This is your fault.” He points a finger at Steve, it’s like something smacks into his chest and he gets flung back. He feels his back slam into something and he’s suddenly a tangle of limbs with Nancy.

“Leave them alone!” Will commands weakly, Steve glances up as he detangles himself from his friend. Who the hell was this kid, Regan from The Exorcist?

-

Nancy sits up, her body already sore from being smacked around by supernatural forces and from the impact of Steve’s body with hers. The mysterious little boy is standing with his hands on his hips, almost like an angry parent.

He steps over to the group of boys near the fallen rope, he reaches out and grabs onto Eleven's wrist. Mike makes an objecting noise and his arm shoots out to intercept, but his hand sails right through the boy. Just like a ghost, his hand disappears through the boy's chest and out through his back, yanked back in alarm.

"Why are you helping them?" The little boy pulls the girl forward out of the group of boys; she glances back at Mike and releases his hand before following him over towards Jonathan and Will. "We're like brother and sister, you know." He says with a smile.

"Brother… and sister?" The girl asks in confusion, she didn't seem to recognize the boy at all. Nancy watches Steve rise to his feet again; she reaches out and grabs ahold of his wrist, yanking him back down. This kid had powers like Eleven and he could splatter their brains all over the place if he wanted. They had to watch and wait; improvising was Nancy's strong point.

"We lived in the same place… I didn't know about it for a long time, but then you escaped." He tells her, reaching out and holding her hand gently. "You opened the gate, and I knew it was my way out." He grins happily, the girl looks sincerely freaked out, and Nancy doesn't blame her in the slightest. Why wasn't she attacking?

"Who are you?" Eleven questions hesitantly, but the boy doesn't seem offended by it.

"My name's Six. I've been watching you for a long time, keeping you safe." He explains kindly, then gestures to the large monster. "This is Pal, he's my friend." He lets go of Eleven to step over to the creature, settling a hand on its hairy leg and petting it gently. "We've been waiting a long time." He claps his hands

excitedly.

“Why are you attached to Will, then?” Jonathan questions, Six’s expression darkens and he looks over at the older boy with malice.

“Because I need a way to stay here.” He says simply, and then looks back at the monster. “Pal wants to stay too, we need energy.” He tells this part to Eleven, as if pleading with her. “My body died a long time ago; I need a new one... Pal’s body can’t survive here unless he takes people’s energy, and he only needs one more person.” He holds up one small finger.

“Why the Byers?” Nancy calls, Six shoots her a glare, his silhouette flickers and then holds solid once more.

“Will would have died down there without me, I just followed him home. All I had to do was find someone who had a weak brain so Pal could come through.” He looks back over at Jonathan, who has wide eyes. “He was just next door.” He giggles, delighted by his own words. Nancy grabs Steve’s arm when he tries to stand again, and then suddenly the boy is standing next to them.

“Jesus Christ, he’s like a little Houdini.” Steve says as he falls back in surprise, the boy squints his eyes at Steve accusingly. His eyes are a foggy gray color up close, like those of Lonnie’s after his death, and his blonde hair is dirty and matted.

“But then you and Nancy tried to mess it all up.” He points a scolding finger to Steve, who raises his eyebrows and frowns up at

the kid. “But I’m smarter than you, I don’t lose.” He hisses, and then turns away. “I take Will’s body, Pal eats Jonathan. I’m sure their mommy will miss them, so we can take their place, Eleven.” He promises, stepping closer.

The girl looks horrified at the idea, and Nancy feels her skin crawling at the boy’s excited tone. He was twisted and soulless, like the Upside Down had sucked the caring from him. He was an example of what might have happened if Will hadn't come out from there, of what that place could do to people.

“I can be Will, and you can stay El because their mommy already likes you.” He explains, reaching out and touching the girl’s arm. She yanks back and he frowns, trying to step closer. “What’s wrong? Don’t you want to be a family?” He asks, his form flickering.

“Friends don’t hurt friends.” She shakes her head, his eyebrows furrow together and he frowns.

“But you’re my friend, I’d never hurt you.” He promises, reaching out, she steps back again.

“Jonathan and Will, my friends.” She states firmly, her own mouth twisting into a scowl. “You can’t stay.” She shakes her head, the boy’s hands curl into fists at his sides and he stomps his foot.

“What do you mean I can’t stay?” He demands angrily, the monster growls threateningly and its head twists. “I’ll do whatever I want, you can’t tell me what to do.” He snaps at her, and then casts a

hand out. “Pal, eat him.” He demands.

“No!” Will shouts in panic from his spot pinned to the ground. Steve jumps to his feet and gets thrown backwards, skidding along the leaves with a grunt. The monster rears up, Jonathan stares up at it with wide eyes and unmoving.

Then, there’s a flash, and for a moment everyone is blind.

-

“We got it!” A man’s voice shouts as the light begins to dissipate, there’s a loud crash. Jonathan squints against the dimming flash and finds the monster on its side with a series of ropes and nets over it. He makes eye contact with the little boy named Six, who looks genuinely afraid before he practically blinks out of existence.

Jonathan can see a few men rushing through the bushes; he scrambles to his feet and heads over to where Nancy and Steve are lying stunned on the ground. He grabs onto their arms and begins pulling them to their feet.

“Everyone scatter!” He calls out, and hopes that the boys will listen. They take off through the trees; Jonathan knows they can’t go back to the house, so they’d just have to hide somewhere else. God, wanted fugitives of the government, this was so not looking good on his college application.

-

Steve keeps looking back at the trees behind him, there's a constant noise all around them that sounds a lot like boots stomping through the leaves. He hoped the kids were all right, he'd lost them in the flash, and then Jonathan had been grabbing his hand and shouting for everyone to run.

Steve keeps a tight hold of the young man's hand and his other is clasped in Nancy's. He can't afford to lose either of them, who knows what those people might do to them if they were caught? They hit an incline and Steve skids to a stop behind Jonathan just as he slides forward down the hill, barely keeping his balance near the bottom and then turning his head.

"Keep going! Don't stop!" Steve commands, taking Nancy's hand and dropping down on one knee to slide down himself. The girl yelps and follows closely behind, when they reach the bottom Jonathan is still waiting for them, but they don't have time to fuss over that. He takes the younger boy's hand and they're off again, Steve can't believe that they haven't been caught yet. It felt like they were being let go, which put a knot in his stomach.

They reach the edge of the woods near the dirt road leading to the drop off, there's nobody in sight. They all look left and right, not releasing one another but shuffling closer together.

"Why aren't they following us?" Jonathan pants in confusion, looking back at them with a wary expression.

“Maybe they are.” Steve offers quietly, out of breath himself.

“No, it’s like they let us go.” Nancy argues, and Steve wished she hadn’t come to his same conclusion, and then he might have been able to ignore the idea.

“Damnit,” Jonathan hisses, turning and taking off down the dirt road. Steve glances back at Nancy and they’re following him again, kicking dirt up behind them as they tear down the pathway. Jonathan turns a corner and Steve pushes himself harder just to keep up, when he turns he runs right into the young man, shoving him into the ground accidently.

“Sorry,” He pants, then glances up and finds Mike, Dustin, and Lucas standing near the cliff like they’re not sure what to do. Mike turns and spots them, looking visibly upset.

“Nancy, Jonathan!” He calls, running over with tears in his eyes. “We couldn’t stop them; I didn’t know what to do!” He says, tears beginning to streak through the dirt on his face.

“Where’s Will?” Jonathan demands, the boy shakes his head with a sob. Dustin and Lucas come trailing over a little slower, each looking visibly shaken.

“El too, they took them.” Lucas tells him solemnly.

“No!” Jonathan kicks his foot along the ground, which sprays gravel and dirt through the air. “No, no, not again.” He shakes his head; he smacks away Steve’s hand when he tries to touch his shoulder. “Not again, Steve. Not again.” He snarls, turning and looking into the woods.

“Are we gonna go after them?” Dustin asks cautiously towards Steve, who meets his eyes for only a moment before staring a hole into the back of Jonathan’s head. He could practically hear the cogs turning in his head, his mind deciding that no matter what, those kids were coming home.

“Jonny?” He murmurs, Jonathan looks back at him with tears in his eyes. “I’m with you, man.” Steve promises quietly with a nod of his head, Jonathan swallows roughly.

“Let’s go.” He says hoarsely, and then starts back into the woods. Steve has no choice but to follow behind, he couldn’t let Jonathan do this by himself. They were going to hunt down government officials and rescue those kids, consequences be damned.

-

“What are we gonna do?” Dustin asks as they reach the house, there’s nobody in sight; they must have found what they were looking for. Jonathan knows for a fact that if they don’t move now, they’ll never see Will and Eleven ever again.

“No ‘we’, just us. You three are gonna stay here.” Jonathan says distractedly as he hurries into the house with everyone following

him into his room. He pulls open his closet, pushing a few t-shirts out of the way and reaching into the back.

"We want to help!" Mike objects, and then makes a noise which Jonathan interprets as Nancy had done something painful to him.

"You're staying here, and you're calling my mom and the Chief." Jonathan explains, leaning out and turning around with the item he was looking for in his hands.

"Jesus Christ, what the hell are you going to do with that?" Steve demands.

"Where'd you even get a shotgun?" Nancy asks in alarm.

"I've got a family to protect. Nance, Steve, you with me?" He questions, Steve nods his head immediately and they both look to Nancy. She glabces between the two of them for a moment, and then sighs.

"All right, but if you get me killed, I'm haunting the both of you." She promises, Steve grins and Jonathan props his shotgun on his shoulder. He turns and rifles through his drawers, grabbing out a bunch of bullets and pocketing them.

"Grab my dad's pistol, then. Steve, you're driving." Jonathan explains, Steve nods his head and starts to walk out behind

Nancy. “Wait, we’re taking my car, grab my keys.” He elaborates; Steve gives him a funny look but nods and continues out. Jonathan looks down at the boys, who seem not too happy. They’re all covered in dirt, leaves in their hair, Dustin’s hat is missing.

“You’re gonna leave us here?” Lucas questions seriously, Jonathan nods.

“You call my mom and the Chief, you tell them we’re taking the back highway and I’m not gonna stop until El and Will are safe.” He instructs them, pointing a stern finger at them. “You tell my mom I love her, and that I’ll be fine but we’ll probably need backup.” He explains, then waves a hand. “Repeat it back,” He says as he turns away and starts walking out of the room, the boys scurry to follow him.

“Call them; you’re taking the back highway. Tell your mom you love her and you’ll be fine, but you need backup.” Lucas sums up for him; Jonathan nods his head and pats the boy on the shoulder as he exits the door and races down the porch steps.

“Nancy, get in the passenger seat.” He orders, Nancy nods her head and climbs in beside Steve. Jonathan opens the back door and slides in, slamming the door and leaning out of the window. “Call them now!” He orders, the boys turn and scramble back inside. “The back highway, Steve.” He explains, Steve kicks the car into reverse and guns it backwards out onto the road.

“How do you know they’ll take the back highway?” Nancy asks, looking back at Jonathan as she loads bullets into her pistol.

“They don’t want any attention on them; it’ll be easy to spot them though.” He mutters, pulling two buck shots from his pocket and cracking his gun open to place them in the barrel.

“Jonathan I can’t shoot anyone.” Nancy says suddenly, Jonathan scowls down at his gun as he snaps it shut. It put a bit of a damper on his plan, but honestly he couldn’t expect that of Nancy. Jonathan was an explosive ready to go off, he had no sympathy for the people that harmed children. Everything wasn’t black and white but blurring into muddy grays until he couldn’t tell what was right or wrong anymore. He’d always been like this, but his anger only made it harder to think. All he knew right now was that there were people standing between him and his little brother, and if they wouldn’t stand down then he’d be forced to kill them.

“Then aim for the wheels of the truck or something, I’ll take care of it.” He says quietly, looking up to scan the road ahead of them. Steve turns; they pull out onto the back highway.

“What if they’re too far ahead, Jonny?” Steve asks, already breaking the speed limit.

“I’ll find them, it doesn’t matter.” He promises solemnly, and when Steve glances back at him, he can’t even offer a reassuring smile. This was dangerous, not some monster but actual people that held a far higher power than they could even comprehend.

“Look!” Nancy points ahead, there’s a line of cars ahead. Two white trucks being followed by a black van, extremely similar to the one they had ridden in before.

“Nance, shoot out the van’s tires.” He instructs, the girl looks back at him in confusion.

“What if they’re in there?” She asks, he shakes his head in reply and pats Steve’s arm.

“Speed up, Steve.” He orders, the young man nods and they’re breaking 75 miles per hour now. “Shoot the tires out, even if they are in there, the Chief will find them. We can’t risk losing the other cars. Besides, the van is protecting the trucks. They’re hauling that monster, El and Will...” He mutters gravely, Steve glances back at him with trepidation as Nancy rolls down her window.

“They’re in one of the trucks.” Steve finishes grimly, and Jonathan nods. Nancy takes a shot, the van ahead swerves wildly and she shoots again. An arm comes out of the driver seat window and the teens duck as a shot is fired through the windshield. “Jesus!” Steve swerves, almost off the road, but then rights again.

“Don’t lose them, Nancy take out the wheels!” He shouts, Nancy unfolds from her leaned over position.

“Okay, okay!” She takes aim again and fires once more, the van screeches as its wheel blows out. Steve narrowly avoids hitting it, another shot is fired that goes through the back windshield and blows it out. Jonathan hunches over and grips Steve’s jacket so he doesn’t look back and lose his focus trying to make sure he’s okay.

“Good,” He breathes, sitting up a bit when the van is out of shooting range. Jonathan rolls his window down, Steve and Nancy

glances back at him. “I need you to get up close to the back of the truck.” He explains carefully, Steve’s eyes widen in alarm.

“W-What?” He stammers, Jonathan places his hand back on his shoulder and leans forward.

“Hold this for me.” He says, kissing him gently. “You can give it back later.” He tells him confidently, Nancy takes the wheel because Steve isn’t looking forward anymore.

“Be careful, okay?” Steve orders, Jonathan nods his head and smiles a little.

“Get up close, Nancy I need you to help them back into the car when I send them over. Don't shoot the tires, it'll cause a wreck.” He says to her, she nods her head. He pulls himself out of the car to sit on the window frame, sets his gun on the roof and grabs the other side of the frame to pull his body out carefully. The wind is blowing hard and the trees are rushing past him, but it’s not the time to wimp out now.

He plants one foot on the window frame to lift his other out, levering one leg onto the roof and turning his body to slide down the front windshield. He keeps himself on the right side, one hand hooked into the hood and the other on his gun. They begin to approach the truck, Jonathan plants his feet firmly and cocks his gun. He leans forward against the wind, planting a hand on the hood and pushing himself into a kneeling position, praying that Steve doesn’t have to hit the brakes.

He takes aim, fires at the lock on the back door mechanism. It stains the metal black and pieces of the lock fly, one cracks his windshield and he falls back onto his hood, denting it inwards. Steve keeps the car steady luckily, and Jonathan watches as the door pops up and down with a bump in the road. He glances back and waves his hand, Steve speeds up a little more.

The door slides up and one of the men that had escorted them to the facility is at the edge holding a pistol. Jonathan's next breath catches in his throat, but he can see two cots near the back and knows that they'd picked the right truck. Maybe the man expects them to stop, because he's not firing, simply pointing the gun and smiling. Jonathan grits his teeth and brings his gun up to his shoulder, blasting off his first shot. It rockets him back against the windshield and he narrowly avoids sliding off.

The door is shut in the slightest, to the point where Jonathan can still see the man's legs. There's a new stain on the metal where the buckshot had hit, he cocks his gun again and waves his hand again. They pull up closer and he gets back into the kneeling position, he fires and the man drops to his knees, the door shuts once more. Jonathan pushes himself forward and reaches out towards the rim of the truck.

The truck jerks suddenly, Steve almost runs into it and Jonathan has to grab onto the rim just to avoid falling and getting run over. The toes of his sneakers drag along the pavement for a fraction of a second and he pulls himself up, he grabs onto the side of the truck and shuffles to the side, reaching forward to yank the door up.

A shot is fired and Jonathan steps into the back of the truck, slamming the butt of his gun into the man with the gun's head

where he lays on the floor. The rest of the people in the truck seem to be medical personnel, just two men wearing white uniforms. He points his gun at them, even though it's empty, he doesn't want to hurt anyone else.

Eleven and Will are strapped down to the cots, they both raise their heads and smile at the sight of him.

"Jonathan!" Will calls, Jonathan jerks his head at one of the men to signal to him.

"Untie them," He demands.

-

Steve can feel his heart in his throat as Jonathan slams into the truck rim and barely is able to pull himself up. He takes down one of the assholes from the facility and he's holding his gun to the other men in the back, who quickly begin to work to help Eleven and Will get up. Jonathan turns his head to tell them something as they slip off of the cots; they look out at the car with trepidation.

"They're gonna fall," Steve says quietly, Nancy looks to him in alarm. "Take the wheel, I'll help them." Nancy doesn't have time to argue before he's pulling himself out of the driver's window, she makes a startled noise and hurries to scoot over and take the wheel. The car barely slows down before its back at regular speed, Steve shakily pulls himself onto the roof and slides down onto the hood.

“Come on!” He calls, scooting forward and holding out his arms. Will looks to Eleven and takes her hand for a moment, saying something Steve can’t hear over the wind before releasing it. He takes a few steps back and then rushes forward, his left foot lands on the hood and Steve grabs ahold of his arm and his shirt. The boy quickly clings to him, Steve turns and points him to the roof.

“Just climb up and put your feet down on the window frame, then slide in and get in the back!” He shouts over the noise, Will nods his head and then crawls up onto the roof. Steve spots a cop car speeding up with its lights on behind them, he grins brightly. He turns his eyes back to the truck, Eleven is watching him carefully. He gestures for her to go, she steps back and leaps forward. He almost misses her, but he grabs her hand before she can slip down the front.

He pulls the girl into his arms and squeezes her comfortingly, staring over at Jonathan, who was now turning around. He urges Eleven onto the roof of the car and faces the truck once more, they were almost home free. Jonathan drops his shotgun, stepping back, there’s a sudden movement behind him.

“Behind you!” He shouts just as a gun goes off over the almost deafening wind. Jonathan’s eyes are wide, his body still and frozen. Steve feels his heart stutter at the sight of Jonathan’s white t-shirt beginning to stain dark red in the chest. “No!” He crawls forward with his hand held out, Jonathan is still frozen. His mouth is hanging open and his eyes trail downwards to his chest, hand reaching up shakily. The man behind him grabs the young man by the shoulder and yanks him backwards; Jonathan collapses down onto the floor of the truck, motionless.

He smiles maliciously from where he stands with one hand on the wall of the truck and the other aiming the pistol right at Steve. He can't help but stare defiantly, thinking that this must be the end. He squeezes his eyes shut and another round goes off, he opens them when it sounds like it hits metal. The car begins to smoke and Nancy jerks the wheel. They swerve off the road and Steve is thrown off of the hood, he rolls through the gravel on the side of the road, the breath knocked from his lungs.

It takes a few seconds for his brain to restart, and then he's rolling onto his stomach and pushing himself onto his hands and knees and watching the truck door slide shut and the car keep going. His ears are ringing and his mind is beginning to catch up to the injuries inflicted upon him, but he can't seem to care.

"No!" He screams hoarsely, tears in his eyes and quickly spilling as he gasps in both pain from his body and his heart. "Jonathan!" He calls desperately, trying to stand and crying out when his leg refuses to cooperate. He collapses back onto the gravel, eyes watching until the truck disappears down the road and Hopper's car slides to a stop next to them.

His ears pop and he can hear Will shouting and Nancy crying from the driver's seat, Joyce is shouting for her boys and Steve can't do anything but stare at the empty highway ahead. A voice rattles in his head as he drops his back down against the ground and stares up at the sky.

Hold this for me,

You can give it back later.

8. The Return

Notes for the Chapter:

> (Okay so this is a time jump chapter, and then we'll have one more chapter that will sort of be an ending but not really. Lost Cause will end, but there will be a continuance! The next part of the story will be a crossover between X-Files and Stranger Things, you really don't have to know anything about X-Files to read it. There might be a few mentions of people but as long as you know what Mulder and Scully look like then you should be fine. Anyways, enjoy!)

October 3rd, 1986

He stares down at the pack of crumpled up cigarettes in his hand, caught in heavy thought as he sits on the edge of his hood. He hadn't smoked one in almost two years, . The bell sounds and kids flood out of the building, all racing out in a joyous ruckus that breaks Steve from his deep pondering. He shoves the old cigarettes deep into his back left jean pocket, where he always keeps them.

A group of kids come scattering out that he recognizes by the tune of their voices, glancing up and waving as they walk closer.

"Hey twerps, how's it going?" He asks as Will steps forward and gives him a small side hug, Mike reaches out and shoves him gently. The boys break into laughter when Steve pushes the young Wheeler away by his face.

“Who’re you callin’ twerps, dickhead?” Dustin snorts; Steve grins and grabs the bill of the boy’s hat, jerking it downwards over his face.

“Anybody else need a ride?” Steve offers, the boys all shake their heads and Steve puts a hand on Will’s shoulder as the boy slips past him to get into the passenger seat. “Mikey, has Nancy called you guys lately?” He questions curiously before the others can walk off, the boy shakes his head with a frown.

“Do you want me to call her for you?” Mike asks, Steve shakes his head and waves a hand at him.

“It’s fine, I was just wondering.” He mutters, glancing away. “She’s busy with school, I’ll catch up with her eventually.” He assures, smiling a little and opening his car door.

“Later Steve,” Lucas waves; Steve returns the gestures as he sinks down into his car. The boys turn and head off towards the bike racks, Steve pulls his seatbelt over his chest and locks it into the mechanism. He turns his head to Will, who had already done the same and was adjusting his backpack near his feet.

They had decided to hang out just before a planned Dungeons and Dragons quest later on that night, as tomorrow Joyce and Will were headed away for a long weekend to visit Will’s grandmother in Illinois. They’d be leaving early in the morning, and staying all next week.

“What’d you learn in school today?” He questions

patronizingly, Will gives him a look but it doesn't last for more than a second before he smirks in amusement.

"We learned about algebraic equations, the history of the Constitution and how to correctly punctuate different types of sentences." He offers in the same joking manner, Steve's face crinkles up into a grimace and he shoves his key in the ignition.

"That sounds awful, glad I'm not in school anymore." He chuckles, Will pushes at his shoulder and he turns in his seat to pull out of the parking lot. "How's El doing?" He questions as they drive out onto the road, he turns the street corner and leans back in his seat.

"Mr. Clarke says she should be in regular classes by next year, with extra help after school of course." The boy tells him, smiling lightly. Steve nods his head; the girl was practically a sponge for learning. She was slowly catching up with everyone else, even her speech had begun to benefit from the amount of reading she was doing in her free time.

"I bet Mike is psyched," He offers, Will laughs quietly and nods his head.

"He's more excited than she is, he's really proud of her… We all are." He agrees easily, tapping his fingers gently on the window frame. Steve shifts in his seat and focuses his eyes on the road, sighing quietly as he slows to a stop for a crossing guard. "How are you?" Will questions after a moment of quiet, voice hesitant and unsure.

Steve had gone through quite a rough patch the year before like the rest of them, and just as it had been clearing up, Steve's parents had died. There had been a plane crash on their way to Europe, their graves were out in the cemetery but Steve didn't visit very often. In fact, he avoided the cemetery like the plague; he couldn't even look in its direction whilst driving by it.

"I'm good, little man." He says in reply, voice gentle and lilting sadly in just the slightest. He wasn't exactly better, but he was getting there. It had taken a while to get over it all, but everyone else was coping as well. "Do you want burgers or pizza?" He inquires for a nice change of subject, Will couldn't be distracted from something important but he could allow a topic switch if he saw fit.

"Burgers sound good," Steve breathes a silent sigh of relief and smiles, reaching over and ruffling the boy's hair. "Hey, watch the hair!" He objects loudly in a mockery of Steve's usual catchphrase.

"Get a life, kid." Steve huffs, Will sticks his tongue out at him and Steve grins as they head into town. Yeah, nothing was perfect or great, but he had some great people by his side.

-

"If the train is late, we must take the bus." She reads a little stiffly, but Jim doesn't mind at all, it was a great improvement. "The umbrella is in the closet with the coats and shoes." She traces her finger along the bottom of the words, a concentrated look on her face. "How many apples can Peter hold in his basket?" Her tone tilts into a questioning one, not monotone like she had been doing the week before.

“That’s fantastic, Elle!” He praises with a bright smile, the girl looks up at him from the book with a grin. “I’m so proud of you, you know that?” He lets out a grunt of a noise when the girl rams into his chest to hug him, he chuckles quietly and hugs her back gently.

“Can we get ice cream?” She questions as she steps back, Jim smirks and reaches out to brush a finger along her chin, she smiles bashfully.

“Well how else are we supposed to celebrate?” He asks in amusement, the girl does a fist pump, a common imitation of the boys she spent so much time with. She had taken on a lot of their gestures and phrases, Jim practically had a heart attack a few months before when he’d heard Elle call the broken toaster a ‘dickhead’.

“I go get my coat,” She says, turning and racing off towards the back room where she had been staying. Jim had Joyce help him decorate it a bit to make it more for a thirteen year old girl. Elle was a mix of clashing genres, with posters of science fiction movies and fantasy figurines lining pink shelves and white dressers.

Jim couldn’t help but love her; she had patched up a hole in his heart with her presence. She wasn’t a replacement of Sarah or anything of the sort; it was just nice to have her around, someone to take care of other than just himself.

“Purple or blue?” Elle leans out from the hallway with a frown; Jim shrugs his shoulders and clicks his tongue to the roof of his mouth. She looks at him impatiently, a few strands of hair

hanging in her face.

“Purple.” He decides, she smiles brightly and disappears again.

-

“The goblins scurry away in fear, a sure sign that there is definitely something deadly ahead. You come to a fork in the cave, unsure as to which way the goblins came from, what do you do?” Mike asks with a raise of his eyebrow to his team, who are on the edge of their seats at the time.

Dustin looks between Will and Lucas for advice, but they seem to be unsure themselves. Elle takes a sip from her Yoo-hoo chocolate milk and Dustin looks to her.

“Elle, left or right?” He asks carefully, the girl frowns and purses her lips.

“Right,” She decides with a nod of her head, Dustin looks to Mike with a smile.

“Like the lady says, we go right.” He smirks, Mike grins wickedly as they roll the dice, earning their passage and moving forward.

“You enter the right tunnel, heading down through the damp darkness. The smell of rotting flesh is pungent in your nostrils!” He sneers, the boys scoot closer to the table in anticipation.

“Pun-gent?” Elle repeats in confusion, Mike pauses and glances over at her.

“Really strong, the smell is really strong.” He offers in his regular voice, and the girl seems to ponder this for a moment before nodding her head and waving a hand at him to continue.

“Thank you,” She says kindly, he smiles at her and then ducks his head back in his dungeon master planner. He clears his throat, ready to get back into his scary DM voice.

“As you tread down into the pitch black, the ground gets rougher and uneven. Your lanterns reveal that you are walking on the bones of past adventurers that have perished here.” He says with his voice low, shoulders hunched as the boys seem to lean forward even closer.

Elle props her head on her chin with a small smile, eyes sparkling with excitement. Even though she hadn’t really played all that much, she often compared their adventures to a really good storybook. She’d rather listen and add in her own occasional opinion, they were still developing her character and she’d probably join them eventually. But for now, she seemed content with just observing.

“Suddenly a growl echoes through the cave, shaking the-“

“Michael!” His mom calls suddenly from upstairs, everyone sighs and slumps back in their seats.

“Mom, I’m busy!” He shouts back, there’s quiet for a moment.

“Your sister is on the phone!” The woman tells him with irritation, he shoots up from his seat and is up the stairs in just a few seconds. He snatches the phone from his mother, placing it to his cheek.

“Nancy?” He murmurs, a little out of breath.

“Running a marathon, little brother?” The girl questions teasingly, he smiles and leans against the counter.

“We’re on a quest, Elle and the guys are over.” He explains to her casually, the older girl laughs and he smiles.

"How is everyone?” She asks, he shrugs and hums quietly.

“Good I guess, Mr. Clarke says Elle is making good progress in her tutoring.” He tells her proudly, Nancy makes an amused noise in response. “Steve was asking about you today, he

wanted to know if you had called. Are you avoiding him?" He questions nosily, unable to help himself.

"What? No of course not!" She objects, as if the notion is absurd. *"I've just been busy; it's not a big deal."* She assures, and then pauses for a moment. *"How is Steve?"* She asks quietly.

"He seems okay, he picked Will up from school and they went out for lunch." He says as he steps over to the fridge, stretching out the phone cord to search in the fridge for something to drink. He pulls out a bottle of water, setting it on the counter.

"Well that's good, how's Will?"

"He seems good too; he goes to the graveyard once a month instead of three times now." He says, trying to find something good to say so his sister doesn't worry. Ever since she had left for California a few months before, she kept worrying about everyone. It was understandable that she wanted to get out though, he supposed. They had all been through a lot, lost a lot.

Mike often felt guilty that he got the good end of the deal; he thought he'd never get Elle and Will back at different points. He has all of his friends, all of his family. Steve, Will, Nancy, Ms. Byers, they all lost someone very dear to them. Jonathan had died saving Will and Elle, and he'd be grateful of that forever.

It actually made him appreciate his sister, made him realize that he had something to lose.

“Him and his mom are heading out to Illinois to visit his grandma for a week.” He adds as an afterthought.

“I suppose that’s good,” Nancy offers optimistically, Mike nods. *“I’ll be home for Christmas in December.”* She promises, and he smiles a little.

“Okay,” He mutters, glancing towards the basement door when it creaks open and Elle peeks out. “I have to go, Nance. Talk to you later,” He says quickly, stepping closer to the phone cradle.

"Seeya Mike,” She says, and he hangs up.

“How is Nancy?” Elle asks as he approaches with his water bottle, she was still trying to find her way around proper English. It was sort of like Dustin’s cousin from Sweden who had an odd accent, trying hard to form sentences they were unfamiliar with. They start heading down the stairs together.

“She’s good,” He says with a nod of his head, leaping over the last step and hurrying over the table. “Where was I?” He questions as he sits down and picks up his dungeon master planner.

“A growl in the bone filled cave.” Dustin fills in; Mike grins and then puts on his serious face, clearing his throat. They were in for a long night, Mike was sure this was his best quest yet.

-

"Morning, Chief!" Officer Powell greets him cheerily, far too cheerily for such an early morning (Okay so it was almost noon, but still!). Jim had never been a morning person, in fact, he found morning people rather odd. Luckily, Elle wasn't a morning person, she slept in and often gave even Mike a glare if she hadn't woken up properly and was being bothered.

"Hey," He grunts, shuffling over to the coffee machine and pouring himself a cup. He wipes the sleep from his eyes and yawns, pouring some sugar into the cup and then taking a whiff before sipping at the hot beverage.

Jim hears the front door of the station squeak open as he sinks down at the table where he'd left a few case reports last night. He had stayed late and had dinner with Joyce, afterwards they had sat and talked, Jim had pushed his reports aside to focus all his attention on her.

Unfortunately, she had left this morning with Will. They were in southern Illinois visiting Joyce's mother for a week. They had decided to leave early before the sun rose. So Jim and Joyce had a final date night, and he wouldn't be able to see her for seven long days. He cherished those nights, where the kids were off playing the weird little games they enjoyed and he could just be alone with the woman he loved.

But he hated paperwork, very very much.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, sir." Flo says from her desk, Jim glances over at her and finds a figure standing on the other side

with the hood of their jacket pulled over their head. The person, or man as Flo had provided, was slouched awkwardly to one side and leaning against the desk. His jacket was much too big for him, as were the jeans he had on, distorting his true frame, but Jim believed him to be on the small side. The man had a bag on his shoulder; some sort of scuffed and dirtied up gym bag. Flo was holding a piece of newspaper in her hand, reading over it.

The man offers no reply to her confusion, and something in Jim's gut makes him continue to watch instead of return to his work. Flo continues to look at him, the man has his head ducked slightly but he reaches out and taps a shaking and unsteady hand on the paper, as if urging her to read it again.

"Is that blood?" Flo gasps, stepping back and knocking into her desk. All of the officers are turning and looking now, a few of them stand up and Jim can't help but join them.

"Sir, can I help you?" Powell calls, walking up behind the figure.

Jim sees a flash of movement in the man's hand before the figure spins around and hits Powell in the face with what appears to be a policeman's baton. The man is knocked to the ground, papers from a nearby desk floating to the ground.

"Weapon!" Callahan shouts, everyone is pulling their guns and pointing them at the figure. "Drop the weapon, now!" Callahan demands, the man continues to stand in a tense position, knuckles gripped white around the baton. His hand did indeed have blood smeared on it, Jim's stomach churns uneasily.

“Identify yourself.” Jim demands as he begins to inch forward, gun aimed steadily, the man’s head turns slightly towards his voice but Jim still can’t see his face. When the assailant doesn’t speak, Jim steps forward again. “I won’t repeat myself, drop everything and identify yourself.” He tells the man calmly.

He makes a noise, the beginnings of a shaking stammer before it cuts off as if he was unable to force the words from his mouth. The man’s voice is a quiet noise, a little gravelly, but higher in pitch than what Jim might have imagined. Jim takes in a deep breath and prays that this won’t end in a shootout.

“Flo, move.” He demands, the woman slips out from behind the desk and races over behind him. “What did he give you?” He murmurs to the woman, who reaches out to offer him the scrap of newspaper he’d seen before. It’s a torn out article, crinkled up and covered in grime and blood, something about a sporting event. There’s awkward scratch written all over it, all of it illegible, but he notes that two words are messily circled.

Assistance.

Speak.

“Everyone put your guns down,” He mutters, approaching the man warily. “Sir, can you please put the weapon down? My name is Jim Hopper, do you need any help?” He questions carefully, the hooded figure steps back when he approaches, running into the desk a little before sliding awkwardly to the side. Jim spots a flash of ratty brown hair and then bloodshot brown eyes are staring warily at him.

There's blood spattered on his face, dark circles making sunken eyes more prominent, and an eerily vacant expression. Jim lowers his gun in shock, the breath leaving him. A face he hadn't seen in a little less than two years, one he was told he'd never see again.

"Jonathan," He says quietly, there's a sparkle of recognition in the boy's eyes but his face doesn't move. "Someone call a bus, right now." He steps forward again and Jonathan holds out the baton in defense, jaw clenching and eyes darkening.

Jim freezes in place, holding his hands up in a placating gesture. Jonathan legitimately didn't seem to recognize him, didn't seem to even fully comprehend what was going on. This kid had been gone for almost two years, what the hell had happened?

"Jonathan, it's me, Jim Hopper." He says quietly, watching the young man's eyebrows furrow together and his lip curl back in a sneer. "I'm in a relationship with your mother, Joyce." He offers, the bag slips off of the young man's shoulder and hits the floor. He watches the young man's eyes flutter, and Jim has to lurch forward just to catch him when he topples forward. "Jesus Christ," He breathes as he lowers the young man to the floor, twisting him slightly to lay him on his back.

"Sir, I thought he was killed in the same fashion his father was." Powell stands over them with confusion and concern written on his face.

"I really don't have time to explain this right now, Powell." He snaps, checking Jonathan's pulse and finding it weak. "Someone call the hospital and tell them to forget the ambulance and have

doctors waiting at the entrance." He lifts the young man into his arms with a grunt, hurrying towards the door and using his leg to push it open. He stares down at the pale face of the boy they thought they had lost; there are scrapes along his jaw and neck, odd pink marks on his sweaty temples.

Jim is barely able to get his car door open, it takes a bit of maneuvering. He settles the young man in the back seat of his car and shuts the door, racing around to the driver's seat and sliding behind the wheel. He pushes the keys in the ignition and lets the engine roar to life before he jerks out of the station lot and flips on his siren. Jim would never forgive himself if he let this boy slip through their fingers again. He had to fix this, for Joyce, for Will.

-

Steve takes a sip of his water as he frowns down at the paperwork in front of him. He wasn't a born businessman, he might have the charm but he really didn't have the eye for being a conniving weasel like his father had been. Essentially, Steve now owned the man's entire company; it just mostly functioned without his help. He needed to look over things now and then, make a decision or two, and reap the benefits. He'd never need to work a day in his life as long as the company was up and running well.

However, this didn't mean he wasn't going to work a day in his life. He had thoughts about getting a menial job to take up his time, something simple but active enough to occupy his restless energy. He hadn't quite decided on what that might be, but he knew he'd find it in Hawkins eventually.

Steve had made a promise to himself that he would never

leave Hawkins. At first he'd convinced himself it was to take care of Will and Joyce, but it was a hard sell considering they were doing just fine on their own. He only saw Will once or twice a week, talked to Joyce on his weekly trip to the grocery story. He didn't get out much anymore, he often felt like just stepping out of the door was too hard. Most of the people he knew before it all had either abandoned him or moved away for college, he was on his own basically.

No parents, no friends, no boy-

The phone rings, he startles and scowls across the room at it. Steve lifts himself out of his seat and walks over, taking the phone from its cradle and placing it against his ear.

"You got Steve, speak now or hold your peace." He hums, knowing that it had to be either Nancy or Will. Nobody else really called him except for the guy who managed the business, and he only called on the first Tuesday of every month.

"Steve, it's Jim. Hopper." Steve frowns, what reason could Chief Hopper have to call him?

"Um, hey, what's up?" He questions hesitantly, anxiety begins to curl in his chest. Was Will hurt, or Joyce? Maybe there was a new monster, or some sort of murder. Why couldn't Steve just have a normal life?

"I need you to stay calm," And those words do the exact opposite for him, he swallows nervously and shifts his eyes around the room. There's a moment of quiet, and Steve clenches his free

hand into a fist, nails digging into his palm just so he can focus on something. *"Jonathan is back."*

Steve's hand tightens on the phone; grip so hard that he's pretty sure he hears the plastic cracking. He stops breathing, stops moving, there's a flash of images in his mind that he'd been trying to bury for a long time.

Hold this for me,

"W-What?" He whispers, heart still beating steadily but slowly picking up pace as the realization hits him. He'd refused it from the beginning; everyone thought he was in denial. For months, he refused to hear anyone say his name; they still didn't say his name around him. He didn't go to the funeral with the empty casket, or listen to Hopper's speech on how the government burned the body to cover their tracks and keep their secrets secret.

"He's alive, Jonathan is alive." Steve feels tears in his eyes, a lump in his throat. He'd spent weeks crying, searching, demanding answers or proof. It had all been a dead end, and now he knew why.

"Where are you?" He demands, voice scratchy and weak.

"The hospital."

Steve wipes a hand over his face and sighs heavily, already looking around for his keys. There were many thoughts racing through his mind, but soon they are all focused on seeing Jonathan again.

“Hey, Hopper.” He says quietly, the man grunts on the other end and he smirks. “I was right.” He says, rather snidely, Hopper scoffs.

“Get your ass down here.” The man tells him sternly, Steve hangs up on him and takes off out of the room and down the stairs. He couldn’t wait to see Jonathan, couldn’t wait to see those pretty brown eyes and hear his voice.

-

“Joyce, honey.” Her mother calls from the kitchen, she glances over to the door and sets down the clothes she was sorting through before heading out into the hall.

“Yes, mom?” She asks in return, the woman leans out from the kitchen doorway.

“Phone for you, sweetheart.” She explains with a nod of her head, running a shaky hand over her face. “It sounds urgent.” She adds, Joyce walks down the hall and takes the phone. She had only given Jim the number of the house, she frowns as she places the phone to her ear.

“Hello?” She clears her throat, leaning against the door frame.

“Joyce, before I tell you anything, I want you to know I’m sorry.” Jim says instead of a formal greeting, she feels her heart begin to race. Will steps into the kitchen with a curious eyebrow raised in her direction.

“Hop, you’re scaring me, just tell me.” She says quietly, serious and worried.

“Jonathan just showed up at the police station.” Joyce’s heart stutters, her world slowing to a stop. The weeks of uncertainty, the funeral… She had visited Steve for months afterwards just to make sure he was taking care of himself while his parents were gone, and especially after they passed away. She had given up hope, accepted what she was told. Her baby had been gone for two years, and she hadn’t been looking for him.

She places a hand over her mouth, eyes filling with tears. She can remember the sweet little boy that never stopped wanting hugs from her, never stopped asking for kisses and stories. The little boy who had grown up into a strong young man that had led a car chase to save his little brother and a girl he barely knew. The young man that had been shot trying to get to safety, the one that Joyce had mourned and was still mourning. Jonathan had never given up, why had she?

“Mom?” Will murmurs worriedly, stepping closer and resting his hand on his mother’s shaking arm. “Mom, what’s wrong?” He asks with concern.

“We’re coming home, right now.” She says, Will’s eyes widen and even her mother looks confused and worried.

“No, no, you just got there. You’ll get home late at night, I brought him to the hospital and you won’t be able to see him until the morning during visiting hours.” Jim hurries to tell her, she shakes her head.

“I want to be there first thing in the morning, then. We’re leaving now, Jim. If you see him, you tell him Will and I are coming home and we’ll see him soon.” She tells him, sure of herself. Jim stammers out another noise and then sighs.

“Joyce, he’s in bad shape. Just please prepare yourself, and Will.” He says, and that finalizes her decision.

“I’ll see you tonight.” She hangs up, Will is still looking at her in alarm. “Pack your bags again, sweetheart.” She leans forward a little so they can be eye to eye, smiling gently. “Jonathan’s alive, baby, he’s alive.” She whispers, Will’s eyes widen even further and his mouth trembles slightly.

“B-But…” She feels her own tears welling up again as Will lets out a sob of a noise and hugs his mother. Joyce’s own mother steps forward, pulling her into a hug as well. They hadn’t told her about what had happened; only that his body was missing and he was presumed dead. Jonathan had been as close as a boy could be to his grandmother as a child, he called her monthly and happily spoke with her unlike most boys would.

“Go and see him, honey.” She whispers, Joyce nods against her mother’s shoulder, setting out to grab her things. She had to get home to her son, and she’d probably have to beat Jim upside the

head for ever letting them all believe what those crooked people had told them.

-

Steve practically runs into the main room of the hospital, skidding to a stop near the front desk and earning an alarmed look from the receptionist and all the nurses nearby. He pans the room, searching desperately until he spots Hopper standing in the waiting room talking to a doctor.

“Hey!” He rushes over, the doctor gives him a puzzled look and Hopper makes a face before running a hand over his mouth. “How is he?” He questions breathlessly.

“This is Steve Harrington; he’s Jonathan’s… best friend.” He offers in explanation to the man, who nods his head slowly and places his hands on his hips. *Best friend,* Steve mentally scoffs. He was Jonathan Byer’s boyfriend, his lover, whatever you wanted to call it.

“I’m Dr. Reilly, nice to meet you.” He greets casually.

“Hi, how’s it going, what’s going on?” He says quickly as he turns his eyes to Jim, who imitates the doctor’s stance and quirks an eyebrow.

“Well he disappeared before he was eighteen, so he never signed a health care proxy form. Technically, Joyce is the first one in

line to make decisions." Jim explains to Steve, who nods slowly. "However, we just spoke with Joyce on the phone and she has permitted that in her place I can make decisions and be put into the loop."

"Okay that's good, don't really care, *how is he*?" He emphasizes the last three words with a gesture of his hands. Jim gestures to the doctor with a roll of his eyes, who looks between the both of them without humor.

"You said he was limping, it's probably a sprain, which is minor, that's not what I'm really worried about." The doctor begins uneasily; they both lean forward expectantly as the man lowers his voice. "Most of the blood he was covered in wasn't his. He's malnourished, dehydrated, covered in scars that seem self-inflicted, and he's exhibiting signs of drug withdrawal."

"Has he woken up yet?" Jim asks, the man sighs and scratches a hand through his beard and shakes his head in answer.

"I'd think he was a homeless junkie if it weren't for some other things." He explains gently, making a small gesture of his hand. "He has surgical scars, and there was a problem when we tried to get an MRI." He mutters almost shamefully, Jim and Steve share a look before the both of them cross their arms across their chests.

"What kind of problem?" Jim asks cautiously, the man frowns and sighs again.

"There was some sort of metal thing implanted in the back

of his neck; one of our surgeons is removing it as we speak." He explains hesitantly. "This is some weird stuff, stuff that you would see in a Ruskie P.O.W. experiment lab. The metal heated up when we tried to bring him in to do an MRI; it blistered the skin on the back of his neck." Reilly tells them carefully, Jim's head drops forward and he brings up a hand to run it over his thin hair.

"Jesus," Steve whispers, swallowing roughly. The implications were great; those government dickwads had kept Jonathan to themselves and said he was dead. Metal implants, surgical scars, what the hell had they done to him?

"What was the reason he passed out?" Jim asks warily, the doctor clasps his hands together in front of him.

"Most likely exhaustion or dehydration, a mixture of both maybe." He offers with a small shrug.

"Anything else?" Steve sighs, Reilly makes a face as if perplexed by a thought.

"We did notice some burn marks, near his temples. Was he at any point exhibiting signs of mental illness?" He questions with a straight face, Jim looks to Steve, who shakes his head.

"Not that I know of, he was fine when he disappeared." He says, voice shaking in the slightest. Fine as in with a bullet hole in his chest, but at least he hadn't been put through god knows what sort of MK Ultra bullshit.

“What would that have to do with anything?” Jim interrupts with a raised hand, the man shrugs.

“The burn marks look similar to electricity burns, and the placement of them would indicate he was going through electroshock therapy.” Reilly tells them, seeming rather confused about his own words. “I’ve never seen anything like this, but from what you told me happened at the station…. He could have brain damage or memory loss from prolonged electrocution, or he could be suffering from severe psychological trauma… Maybe even both; we can’t be sure until he wakes up.” He says quietly, sullen.

“What if he does have brain damage or memory loss? He didn’t recognize me. Would he ever get that back, do you think there’s a possibility he won’t know anyone?” Jim questions rapidly, the man shakes his head and steps back.

“We can’t be sure, brain injuries can be tricky, and electroshock therapy is risky for a reason. He could forget pieces of things or nothing at all; sometimes people have to be retaught how to read and write or to even speak. There are two sides of extremes and we won’t know until he wakes up, that’s all I can tell you.” The doctor explains to them, crossing his arms. “I’ll come tell you when he’s out of surgery; he’ll probably be awake in a few hours.”

“C-Can… Do you mind if I wait in his room after he’s brought back from surgery?” Steve asks before the man can step away, the doctor glances over at Jim and back to him.

“We don’t let non-family members back for a while.” He

says quietly, Steve feels it like a stab to the heart. *I'm not just a friend,* he wants to shout, *I love him you idiot.* He wants everyone to know, to realize that this was more than worrying about a friend. He had kissed Jonathan before he left, watched him get shot, felt the bullet pierce his own heart in a way.

He had broken his leg and busted some ribs in the crash, and spent a few days crying in the hospital with Will at his side. The boy had been his greatest comfort, and he supposed in a way Will felt connected because they had both been close to Jonathan. After he'd gotten out, he'd tried to search, but there wasn't much to go on besides Hopper's words. His parents were never any comfort; they didn't even come home at the news of the accident. He thinks about the plane crash and a sour taste develops in his mouth, he just wants to be able to see Jonathan.

"His mother and brother won't be here until late tonight, he shouldn't wake up alone." Hopper puts in, and Reilly frowns a little, scanning over Steve for a moment before nodding.

"All right, but you have to be quiet."

-

Elle sits outside the school, awaiting Hopper's arrival. He wasn't usually late, but she didn't mind all that much. She had a few books that she carried around in her bag, so she reads through one as she waits near the front doors of the school. Nobody was around; it was pretty quiet except for the occasional car passing.

She pulls the scrunchy off of her wrist and wraps her hair in a loose ponytail like Nancy had taught her, to keep her hair out of her face. She places her finger under the first word on the page, sounding it out in her head until she begins to catch the rhythm of the words blending together into sentences. Reading was hard, but it was also fun, she liked hearing stories and if nobody was around she could read her own stories now.

There's a flash of light behind her eyes that makes her head hurt, and she squeezes them shut to stave off the sudden sickness that follows it. She'd had headaches before, been sick a few times, this felt different. Another flash, her heart begins to race as her book slips off of her legs.

"Please, let me go!" A voice hisses urgently. The room around them is white and familiar; Elle spots a rather skeleton looking version of the boy that had saved her not long ago strapped to a bed. His skin is milky white, littered with scars and scabs, his eyes are bloodshot and the skin around them is a dark color. He's frantically talking to a woman, a nurse, Elle supposed from the sight of her clothes. It reminded her of the days in the facility, she didn't understand.

"I can't, I'm sorry." The woman whispers, stepping a little closer and adjusting the covers over him.

"You're not," Jonathan's hand slips from one of the cuffs, reaching out and snagging something off of the woman's belt. He sticks it into her side and she shrieks, convulsing where she stands before falling back and twitching on the floor. Jonathan makes quick work of undoing his other strap, then removes the ones on his legs. He slips out of bed and towers over the woman, slowly coming back to full awareness. She begins to gasp in fear, eyes wide and afraid.

"P-Please," She whimpers, holding her hands above her head. He simply raises his leg up off of the floor shakily and brings his

foot down roughly against her neck, there's a snap and Elle startles at the brutality of it.

"Elle!" Elle looks up as the bright images in her head fade away, breathing heavily as she blinks up at the police car sitting just a few feet away. It's not Jim, but Callahan, one of Jim's officers. She frowns up at him and mechanically picks up her books and shoves them into her bag.

"Hello," She murmurs as she steps closer to the car and slings the bag over her shoulder. "Hopper?" She asks in question, the man looks at her with skepticism and then sighs.

"Your dad's at the hospital, he wanted me to drive you to the Wheeler house; that Byers boy came back." He explains with a wave of his hand. Elle feels her heart do an odd swoop in her chest that she felt when she'd seen the bad men from the facility again that night in the junior high school. Like something was wrong, that things were about to go bad. But there was also confusion, Jonathan was supposed to be dead, how did this happen?

"Take me." She demands, opening the passenger side door and slipping into the car. The man stammers in objection and she shoots him the most serious glare she can muster, he cows under it.

"Okay, okay… Jesus, kid, you're gonna get me fired." He mutters as she pulls the seatbelt across her chest and straps herself in.

She wanted to see Jonathan; she wanted to see what was going on. Adventurers explored and stuck their noses into things, they sought out the truth. Or at least, that's what the boys always

said. She was a brave adventurer just like them, and she wasn't going to sit back and do nothing.

-

Jonathan looks awful, to say the least. When Steve reaches the doorway he can't stop his throat from swelling shut as tears start to burn his eyes. He steps into the room, there's a nurse fidgeting with the IV bags next to the bed but he can't help but stare at the prone form lying in the bed.

Jonathan's hair is tangled and dirty, pushed away from his face. His face is wiped clean, but Steve can see the dirt at the edges of his jaw as if they'd simply cleaned his face and hadn't had time to fully wash him. His skin is even paler than Steve remembered, and he immediately notes the scars and scabs all over his arms. They're a stark contrast against his white skin, a spectrum of pinks, reds, and browns.

"How is he?" He asks quietly to the nurse, who looks to him with a sort of sad look on her face. She's an older woman, small with kind eyes and a soft smile.

"He'll be okay," She assures, reaching out and patting his chest gently. "Keep an eye on him; hit the call button if he wakes up." She instructs, he nods his head and turns his eyes back to the bed as the woman slips from the room. Steve makes his way over and grabs a chair, sliding it up next to the cot and settling down in it.

"Hey, man." He whispers, almost silently, not wanting to

wake him up. “I’m right here, and I’m not gonna let anything happen to you ever again. Nobody’s gonna hurt you anymore, not while I’m here.” He promises softly, reaching out and taking the young man’s hand into his own. It’s cold, frail and bony, Steve is afraid to put any pressure on it for fear of breaking it. His fingers touch marred skin on the younger boy’s palm, he turns it over and scans over small crescent shape scars that repeat and overlap one another.

They look like he dug his fingernails into his own palms…

He supposes the doctor’s allegations that many of Jonathan’s wounds were self-inflicted weren’t wrong, but why was that? What could make Jonathan damage himself to this degree? He squeezes the hand between his own, trying to warm it as if it might bring life to the motionless teen before him.

He can remember the phantom feeling of Jonathan’s hand in his own about two years ago, much stronger and warmer… He smiles at the memory of his boyfriend’s sweaty palms; he rubs his thumb gently across the back of Jonathan’s hand, one of the only unmarred places on his skin.

Steve would wait here until Jonathan was awake, they’d see just what had happened. Everything would be okay now that he was home, they could return to something semi-normal. He had Jonathan back, that stupid grave in the cemetery wouldn’t haunt him anymore...

-

“Michael,” Mike glances up from his homework when his mother steps into the room, frowning at the urgent look on her face. “Have you talked with Elle this afternoon?” She questions, he feels his stomach do a sick twist, was something wrong?

“No, why?” He demands, dropping his pencil and sitting back in his chair.

“I was just in town and I talked to Flo from the police station, she said something happened down at the police station today.” She explains, stepping into the room and crossing her arms. Mike tenses in anticipation for his mother’s next words. “Jonathan Byers is alive, he showed up at the station.. The Chief rushed him down to the hospital.” She says, sounding shocked at her own words.

Mike blinks, trying to process this news. Jonathan was alive? After all this time, almost two years, he’d been alive? Where had he been, what could have possibly-

“The bad men.” He whispers, his mother makes a face and he stands up. “Does Will know?” He demands, the woman sighs and shrugs.

“I don’t have the number to Ms. Byers’ mother’s house.” She tells him, and then waves a hand at him as if to stave off his worry. “I’m sure that the Chief informed them by now… Must be awful, to think everyone thought he was long gone for all this time.” She sighs, glancing away from her son.

“Steve didn’t believe it; he used to get mad if we talked

about him like he wasn't around anymore." Mike admits to his mother, her eyes grow sad and she leans against the door.

"Have you heard from him lately? I haven't seen him since Nancy left." She murmurs, he shrugs and sinks back down into his seat. He wondered if Elle would see Jonathan soon, or Steve, how badly was the eldest Byers hurt? "I'm going to call Nancy and tell her what's going on." She says, turning around and heading out of the room.

Mike runs a hand through his hair, which was starting to get long again. There was no way he could do this homework with his mind so askew with pressing questions and no answers in sight. He had to call his friends, he stands up and steps over near his bed, opening the bedside table and beginning to dig through it. He pulls his radio from under a book he'd recently gotten from the library, and clicks the button on the side.

"Lucas, Lucas come in, it's Mike." He says into the microphone, and then waits a moment. "Lucas it's important, c'mon man, pick up!" He says a little more urgently, pacing impatiently.

"What's going on?" There's a hiss of static but the other boy's words are clear, he glances around and goes back to his desk to begin putting everything away.

"My mom just told me Jonathan is home." He says, almost vibrating with the energy of the news. "Jonathan is alive!" He says with a shout, and then pulls his finger away from the button.

“Whoa, that’s heavy.” Lucas responds over the static, sounding perplexed. “I’ll be right over; we can go find Dustin and Elle.” He explains, Mike nods his head and then remembers that Lucas can’t see him.

“Roger that, meet you out back.” He grabs his favorite ball cap that Nancy had given him before she had left; it was dark green and had the Jedi emblem on it. He flips it around and slips it on his head, racing down the stairs. “Mom, I’m going out!” He calls loudly, grabbing the doorknob already.

“Did you do your homework?” She appears from the living room with an accusing look on her face, the phone in her hand held to her chest.

“Yeah, I did.” He promises easily, then turns on his heel and begins to slip out of the door.

Lucas pulls into the backyard when Mike is getting on his bike. They bring their hands back and clasp them together before pulling back and then fist bumping, their own little handshake.

“I can’t believe Jonathan’s alive, Will is gonna be psyched.” Lucas tells him with a smile, Mike nods his head. “Has anyone called him?” He asks with a frown, Mike shrugs.

“My mom said Jonathan showed up at the station, so the Chief must have called Ms. Byers by now.” He explains, Lucas shakes his head with an awe-filled expression on his face.

“He’s been gone for like what, a year and a half?” He mutters with a wave of his hand, bringing it up to run over his short hair in a nervous gesture.

“Almost two.” Mike says quietly with a nod, Lucas sighs and pushes his bike back a little.

“All right, let’s go get Dustin and hunt down Elle. She might be down at the station.” He says with finality, Mike pulls himself off of the seat and presses his foot down on the pedal to start riding.

“Jonathan’s at the hospital, we might have to check there.” He offers, Lucas glances back at him and seems troubled by this.

“Do you think he’s hurt bad?” He questions hesitantly, Mike glares ahead at the road for a moment.

“I don’t know.” He says sullenly, he hoped Jonathan was okay, but this was Hawkins and bad things happened here. He had a feeling deep in his gut that told him that Jonathan had been through something awful, Elle still had nightmares, what if he went through something similar?

“We have to tell Steve!” Lucas says suddenly with alarm, and Mike looks over to him with wide eyes. How had he not thought of that himself? Jonathan and Steve had just started going out with one another when Jonathan went missing. Mike had never really seen

that lovesick look before, but he now knew what his friends had seen when he was with Elle. Steve looked at Jonathan like he was an angel, and Jonathan looked at Steve like he was seeing him for the first time every time. None of them had a problem with it, but they had known then that if anyone found out the boys would be ostracized by most of the town.

It was one thing to be theorized as and dubbed a queer; it was another to admit it.

“You’re right; we should swing by his house.” He agrees.

-

“Ellie, what are you doing here?” Hopper sighs at the sight of the girl, shooting a glare towards Callahan behind her.

“Is Jonathan okay?” She questions without greeting, the older man scratches at his beard in that way he did when he was trying to be strict but knew he was going to cave to whatever she wanted. Elle had learned him inside and out, he wasn’t all that complicated compared to most people. She knew Hopper and the boys like the back of her hand (whatever that meant, she had heard Dustin use it and she didn’t quite understand it).

“He’s asleep right now; I promise we’ll make sure he’s okay.” He crouches down and she gives him a look, he chuckles. “Sweetheart, I sent Callahan to take you to Mike’s house.” He explains, and she shakes her head firmly. She had to be here, especially if Will couldn’t be.

“Jonathan is my brother.” She says quietly, Hopper’s expression falters and he sighs, weakening.

“All right, you can see him. But you have to be quiet and you can’t stay for long.” He explains, she nods her head and reaches out to take her surrogate father’s hand when he stands upright with a groan. “Wait right here, you’re gonna drive her to the Wheelers place in a few minutes.” He says sternly to Callahan, who nods with a nervous smile.

Elle walks through the halls of the hospital beside Hopper, the place made her nervous but she had to be strong. This wasn’t the facility she’d grown up with; there were more people and nice nurses. She had spent a bit of time in the hospital when Steve had gotten hurt when the car had crashed.

They step up to a room and Hopper reaches out and twists the knob to open the door. Elle steps past him hurriedly, eager to set eyes on the boy that had sacrificed so much for everyone around him, including her. She hadn’t been lying when she’d said he was her brother, she saw Will as her brother as well, and she wanted them safe.

Steve is already there, seated beside the bed and staring down at the motionless body in the bed. Jonathan looks like something from one of the scary movies Dustin brings for them to watch in Mike’s basement, and it makes her pause. She can recognize him from her vision, but if she hadn’t had it, she might not have believed it was him. He was skinny and sickly, with lots of scabs and scars lining his body.

“Hey,” Steve murmurs, she glances from Jonathan and up to meet his eyes. She knew Steve a little, he mostly kept to himself, but she knew how he felt about Jonathan. She had quiet discussions with Will about how love worked, all the different types and the ways they were expressed. Steve and Jonathan had been boyfriends, which meant that they loved each other in a different way than friends and family did. She knew how much his disappearance had affected Steve.

Elle steps around the bed, she takes one more look at Jonathan and listens to the steady beep of the monitor before she turns back to the Harrington boy and wraps her arms around him. She knew that Steve didn’t have a mom and dad anymore, and the boys talked about how he didn’t have any friends anymore. Elle knew that Steve needed the comfort, that he was most likely feeling alone in this. Steve makes a surprised noise and then hugs her back gently; she squeezes him and then steps back.

“How is he?” Hopper questions from the doorway before stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

“Alive… Breathing…” Steve offers quietly, his hand is settled over one of Jonathan’s and he looks tired. He always looked kind of tired since it all happened, but this was more so, kind of like he’d been working for a long time and finally got a break. “He hasn’t woken up yet.” He mutters.

“He was pretty out of it when he showed up; he’ll probably be at least dazed and confused when he wakes up.” Hopper explains, and Steve nods his head.

“I’ll keep him company, he’ll be fine.” He assures, reaching

up with his free hand to drag his fingers through his hair and push it back.

"I saw him." Elle says hesitantly, earning a confused look from the older teen and her surrogate father. "In here." She taps her head, biting her lip.

"What do you mean?" Steve questions warily, shooting a look of concern towards Hopper.

"Waiting at school, I saw him… in the bad place." She offers quietly, Hopper seems to look more distressed and he steps a little closer and lifts her to sit her on the edge of the bed. He kneels down next to Steve's chair and looks up at her with imploring eyes.

"He was there, you saw him?" He asks softly, she nods her head. "Did you see anything else?" He inquires curiously, she shrugs, unsure as to whether or not she should tell about what had happened in her vision. Jonathan had been so violent, he had killed a woman. She knew that killing people was very bad; would Hopper throw Jonathan in jail for it?

"He was tied down, he seemed scared." She explains vaguely, twisting her hands nervously in her lap. "He kept asking to be let go." Hopper glances back at Steve, who was watching Elle intensely, hanging on her every word.

"Anything else?" Hopper asks, she sits quietly for a moment and then shakes her head.

“No.” She promises, feeling awful for lying. But Dustin had once said that there were good lies and bad lies, and that the good lies were used to do good things. She had to keep Jonathan out of jail, even if it meant lying to Hopper about it.

“Okay, I think Callahan should take you home now.” He lifts the girl off the bed and takes her hand once more. “I’ll be back in a second, Steve.” He says. The young man nods and returns his eyes to Jonathan’s face; Hopper closes the door behind them.

“Take her back to the Wheeler house,” He instructs, the girl pouts a little and tugs on Hopper’s jacket.

“My bike.” She objects, he runs a hand over her hair gently and shakes his head.

“Mike can take you to get it if you decide to go out later.” He says simply, and she takes that as a doable solution. “Please stay safe, sweetheart.” He pulls her into a hug, she squeezes him tight and then slips away to follow Callahan.

“Bye!” She waves, then steps out of the hospital doors.

-

“Alive? He got shot in the chest!” Dustin objects, Lucas and

Mike shrug in response. “He legit took a bullet to the back, Will saw it, Nancy and Steve did too!” He waves his hands erratically and then adjusts the hat on his head. He’d lost his last one the day Jonathan had gone missing; Steve had bought him a new one a few weeks later. They had an odd relationship with the older boy, he just sort of drifted in and out of their lives like an old friend every once in a while. They appreciated him a lot more after everything that had happened, he’d been through a lot, like the rest of them.

“I don’t know, those crazy government dudes were doing wild experiments. Maybe they fixed him.” Lucas offers reasonably, and Mike jerks a thumb at him and nods his head in agreement.

“Totally, who knows what kind of creepy men in black lab shit they have going on?” He says with a huff, and Dustin frowns and crosses his arms.

“So where’s Elle, think she’s at the hospital?” Dustin questions, Mike looks to Lucas, who shrugs once more. They had gone to Steve’s house but his car wasn’t in the driveway, so there was a good probability that’s where he was as well.

“She was supposed to be at tutoring with Mr. Clarke today.” Lucas tells them as he adjusts his jacket, placing his hands on his hips. “The Chief probably either picked her up or sent someone else to do it.” He explains, and they all frown.

“But Hopper wouldn’t send her home; he’d probably take her to the hospital or bring her to Mike’s maybe.” Dustin says with a wave of his hand as they turn and start to walk outside to where the bikes rested in the lawn. Dustin walks around the porch and into his garage to retrieve his own bicycle; they all slip onto their seats and

kick off, rolling off the lawn.

"Let's split up, you two head to the hospital and I'll head back to my place to see if she's there." He decides, the boys nod their heads. "I'll meet you up there in a bit, okay?" They settle on that plan and part ways, Mike heads down one way, Lucas and Dustin head the other.

-

Steve steps outside to have a cigarette for the first time in almost two years, he needed some air and he finds himself prying the stale cigarettes from his back pocket. He always carries a lighter as well, not ones with lids of course, he still found them unnerving. He lights the cigarette and quickly presses the end to his lips, taking an inhale of acrid nicotine and filling his lungs with smoke.

He coughs, glaring down at his cigarette and taking one more hit from it, and then dropping it on the ground. Maybe he had just lost his taste for them, or maybe he felt bad squandering something so precious such as life. He snorts to himself, yeah, precious, sure.

He shoves the pack of cigarettes and his lighter back into his pocket with irritation, frustrated that he was unable to get rid of his restless energy. He turns and heads back inside, running fidgeting hands through his hair and sighing as he reaches the room Jonathan was in once more.

He opens the door and freezes in place at the sight of the

empty bed, his next breath catching in his throat as he follows an IV line to a few droplets of blood on the tile where it had been pulled out of the skin it had been stuck into.

Steve scans the room frantically, checks the bathroom, even leaning over and checking under the bed. Jonathan was gone, and he was panicking.

“Hey!” He calls as he steps out into the hallway, a nurse comes rushing over. “Where’s the guy that was in here?” He demands, she frowns and looks past him and into the room.

“I don’t think we moved him.” She says timidly, he sighs in agitation and runs a shaking hand through his hair.

“He’s somewhere in here, get the Chief and lock down the entrances.” He tells her firmly, she nods and turns to scurry off. Steve starts heading down the hall and looking into open rooms, earning quite a few alarmed looks. How far could Jonathan have gotten in less than five minutes?!

-

“Chief Hopper!” The doctor calls as he rushes over, Jim looks to him in alarm, had something happened with Jonathan? He’d left to get him and Steve some coffee, the kid had been pretty squirrelly and Jim had wished he could offer comfort but he barely knew the guy. He’d done what he knew, and coffee fixed many things for himself so he’d gone to get just that.

“What?” He asks, Reilly glances around and leans in as if to not cause panic in the main room.

“Jonathan is missing, his friend stepped out of the room and he must have walked out.” He explains quietly, Jim groans and sets the coffee on the counter.

“His mother is going to maim me.” He mutters, planting his hands on his hips and looking around. “Seal the entrances; tell your orderlies that if they find him then they need to be gentle but cautious. He’s probably in fight or flight mode and I’ve seen that kid’s handiwork, he can do some damage.” He promises, and the man nods his head and turns away.

Jim starts heading down the hall, scanning the people around and trying to get into the head of the young man. He woke up scared and alone, where would he go? Jim stands in the hallway, there was an entire building to search through and a nineteen year old torture victim was somewhere in it.

Jesus, Joyce was going to kill him.

-

“Jonny?” Steve calls as he hurries up the stairwell, checking in every corner and opening. Steve wondered if he’d already tried to walk out, but then again, someone would have noticed a sickly looking guy bleeding from his hand in a hospital gown trying

to walk out of a hospital.

He gets to the top of the stairwell and sees a small smear of blood on the metal doorframe. He slips into the hallway, glancing around and glaring at the floor for any evidence of blood. There's only one main hallway, but it's long and the building is three stories, dozens of rooms that he might have slipped into.

A few orderlies are looking about, mumbling into their radios; Steve wants to find him before they do. He didn't want them to scare Jonathan, or hurt him; Steve was the best bet at reaching him.

He freezes as he walks by a door, leaning back and looking into the room. Jonathan is sitting next to a bed, as if he might be a visitor, the only clue otherwise was his attire and the skeletal appearance of the boy. Steve hesitantly steps inside the doorway, Jonathan doesn't look up, simply continues to stare at the patient asleep in the bed.

It's a little boy, with dark brown hair and pale skin, around eleven or twelve years old (The idea that the boy looked a little similar to Will was not lost on him). Steve crosses his arms quietly and observes Jonathan for a moment. His face is sullen and his eyes that were once bright, wise, and mysterious are now empty and emotionless. Steve feels unease roll through him as he takes another step in the room, Jonathan looks to him then. There's no sign of life, no sparkle, no smile, just a blank stare that makes Steve feel cold inside.

"Jonny?" He whispers, tears filling his eyes threatening to spill out. There are footsteps in the hallway; Jonathan stands up just

as someone reaches the doorway of the room.

"I located the patient," Steve turns his head to find an orderly blocking the door, he holds a hand up before he can step inside. This was a fragile situation, like a kid with a stick of dynamite, he knew what Jonathan was like when he was cornered, he acted on impulse. This was a version of Jonathan that didn't seem to have any sort of emotional response so the possibility that he might just be feral was there. Even if it killed Steve, he knew it was definitely a possibility.

He turns his eyes back to Jonathan, who's slowly stepped away from the bed and now has his back pressed to the wall. His eyes seem to come to life then, fear rigid and present in his expression.

"Jonny, it's me, you know me." He says quietly, coaxing as he steps forward with his hands up in a peaceful gesture. "It's Steve," He takes another step forward and the young man slips to the right and into a corner farther away, crouching down slightly and holding up what Steve quickly realizes is a scalpel.

"He has a weapon!" The orderly behind him says, Steve turns around and holds his hands up to stop him from entering with the other orderly that had arrived behind him.

"Don't." He warns with a finger pointed at them, and then spins back to face Jonathan. "Jonathan, drop the knife." He mutters, holding out his hand and inching forward. "C'mon, I'd never hurt you. I don't know what those bastards did but I'm gonna protect you, okay?" He turns his hand over, palm up and outstretched towards him.

Jonathan's eyes are wide and his knuckles are white where they grip the scalpel, but he looks less ready to attack and more ready to jump out of a window. He glares down at Steve's hand like it might bite him, Steve doesn't think he can press himself back any further but he certainly seems to be trying.

"Your mom and Will are coming home right now to see you; you can see them in the morning." He tells the young man quietly, he blinks up at Steve's face, puzzlement and shock filling his features. "Yeah, your mom and your brother, you wanna see them?" He asks gently, Jonathan glances down at the scalpel in his hand and then at Steve's outstretched hand.

Steve watches him as he pries his fingers open carefully; the scalpel clatters to the floor quietly. Steve smiles reassuringly and keeps his hand out for him; Jonathan frowns at it before reaching out gently and settling a cold, shaking hand in his palm. He's got some blood dried on it, and Steve glances down and finds that the blood that had been spilling from his hand has now started drying and coagulating on the back of his hand.

"Okay, come on." He urges softly, stepping back, Jonathan glances behind the older boy and keeps his feet firmly planted. He keeps a tight (it was actually weak but something told Steve that it was as firm as he could manage) grip on Steve's hand, as if he didn't want to let go but he didn't want to follow either. "It's okay, I've got your back, remember?" He whispers, Jonathan blinks as if the words were familiar (maybe that was just Steve's wishful thinking), he frowns and takes a hesitant step forward.

They walk over to the doorway and the orderlies step out

of the way as Steve leads Jonathan out by the hand. Jim is standing just outside; he looks extremely relieved to see Jonathan ultimately in one piece.

"Hey, kid." He greets, Jonathan steps a little closer to Steve and keeps his eyes on the floor. "Has he said anything?" He turns this question to Steve, who shakes his head and takes Jonathan forward towards the elevator.

"C'mon, man, we'll take you back downstairs." He mutters, Jonathan watches Steve hit the button on the elevator and as soon as the doors open he rips his hand from Steve's grip and staggers backwards. "Whoa! It's just the elevator, Jonny." He assures, Jonathan shakes his head and steps back again, almost falling over a cart.

Jim is standing just a few feet away, talking with Reilly, but they both pause to watch the scene warily. Steve holds out his hand insistently, patient with the young man, but Jonathan simply shakes his head and tucks his bloody hands under his arms in refusal. "What's wrong with the elevator?" He questions with a sigh, glancing back as the doors slowly close.

Jonathan simply stares at him, glancing behind him at the metal doors as if they were a monster's gaping maw. Steve reaches his hand out again and points the other down the hall, to where the stairwell was. His eyes are doing a funny squinting thing, like he was struggling to see or something; maybe he was just making a face…

"Wanna take the stairs?" He questions, Jonathan follows his line of sight towards the end of the hall and then nods slowly. "Okay, come on then." The young man takes his hand once more,

following him down to the end of the haul. They step into the quiet stairwell, the light in it is dim and they descend silently. It takes them a few minutes to reach the bottom; Jonathan clings to the rail with his free hand and hobbles slightly.

"Do you even remember me?" Steve whispers as they stand at the bottom just a foot from the door, Jonathan turns his head and looks at him with curious eyes. He frowns as his eyes trail up above Steve's face, his free hand is doing an odd twitching motion and it reaches up jerkily to take a strand of Steve's messy hair between two fingers. When Steve doesn't move, he takes the initiative to run his trembling hand over Steve's hair softly.

Steve feels tears in his eyes again, he sniffles and ducks his head as Jonathan pulls away, wiping at his face roughly and coughing. He squeezes Jonathan's hand gently and looks up, Jonathan is staring at him blankly again and Steve sighs in defeat.

"All right, let's go." He opens the door and they step out into the hall. Steve didn't quite know what to do; this seemed more like an empty shell than Jonathan. He couldn't quell the anger filling his chest and the utter agony swirling in his stomach; it felt like his flame of hope was being doused.

9. The Long Recovery

Notes for the Chapter:

> (Jeez, the last real chapter of Lost Cause. It feels like it's been eons since I started this fic, but I've loved it throughout the duration of writing. However, this isn't the end! We still have an epilogue chapter, and the sequel of course! The sequel is going to be a crossover between Stranger Things and X-Files, however you won't really need to know anything about The X-Files except maybe what Mulder and Scully look like! Please do enjoy, and thanks for sticking with me!!)

“Is the Chief here?” Lucas questions the nurse at the front desk, leaning up and crossing his arms on the counter between them. Dustin stands just behind him, searching each person in the waiting room for a familiar face.

“May I ask what you’re doing here?” The nurse asks with a raise of her eyebrow, Lucas sighs and Dustin steps forward to stand beside his friend.

“Hello, miss, we’re good friends with the Chief’s sweetheart, and her son is here in this hospital.” He pokes a finger at the counter for emphasis, then smiles. “So if you could pretty please find the Chief or someone that can take us to Jonathan Byers’ room that would be just terrific.” He tells the woman with confidence; she snorts and shakes her head in exasperated amusement before picking up the phone on the counter.

“Chief Hopper to the front desk, you have visitors.” She says into the phone, and it can be heard over the loud speakers down

the hall, a muffled noise that still somehow echoes out around them. “You can wait over there.” She tells them, gesturing them over to the chairs on one side of the main room. Lucas turns and takes Dustin by the wrist before he can shove his foot in his mouth and they both take a seat.

It’s only about a minute before Hopper appears; eyebrows scrunched together in confusion as he approaches the front desk. The boys get to their feet in a hurry, rushing over to him and grabbing at his arms in excitement.

“He’s back?! He’s really back?” Dustin demands loudly as he shakes the man’s arm, Hopper shushes them through gritted teeth and grabs both boys to drag them away from public eye.

“Will you be quiet? We don’t need more attention than we already have.” He mutters as he takes them into the hall and crouches down. “What are you doing here?” He asks with irritation, Dustin scowls and Lucas rolls his eyes.

“What do you mean? We’re here for Jonathan!” Dustin tells him, the unsaid ‘duh’ at the end is made very prominent. “Is he okay? Where’s he been?” Dustin questions impatiently, the man sighs and stands up to his full height.

“We deserve to know, we were friends with him first before anyone else.” Lucas says quietly, Dustin nods his head in agreement.

“We used to play hide and seek in the woods,” Dustin says

sadly, fidgeting with his fingers hesitantly.

“We were his friends, Chief. Will, his mom, Nancy, Steve, they weren’t the only ones that lost something.” Lucas tells him, heart and soul put into his voice.

“All right, you can see him.” He holds his hands up before the boys can celebrate too much, the boys drop their raised celebratory fists and frown up at him. “You two wanna act like adults, I’ll treat you like them. Jonathan’s messed up, simple as that. He’s not talking, not touching, and he’s not happy in the least bit to have visitors.” He explains quietly with a pointed finger.

“What’s wrong with him?” Dustin questions bluntly, and Jim sighs.

“Like I said, he’s not talking. The doctors are trying to figure out what’s going on, I’m trying to figure out what’s going on. Will and his mother will be home later tonight and Steve is keeping Jonathan company.” He goes on to tell them quietly, the boys look to each other and then back to Hopper.

“So, Elle isn’t here, right?” He asks, the man shakes his head slowly. “Well I hope you sent her to Mike’s because he was supposed to be waiting for her.” The overhead P.A. rings and the woman at the front desk calls for him again.

“You kids are gonna be the death of me, you know that?” He mutters, turning and heading down the hall. The boys scurry after him, jabbering in excitement.

-

“Look at that, there’s a person under all this.” Steve teases quietly as he wipes at the dirt on the edges of Jonathan’s jaw and along his neck. Jonathan is patiently silent; he looks slightly miffed to be being put through it but he hadn’t pushed Steve’s hand away just yet.

He had calmed down quite a bit since Steve had gotten him back in the room, he’d promised the staff not to leave Jonathan’s bedside in return for not having him strapped down (something told him that would be a very bad idea). They had come to a silent agreement; Steve could bother Jonathan minimally as long as he kept the staff away from him.

Jonathan stares down at his lap, his fingers tapping twitchily against the sheets over his thighs and barely even blinking. Steve wants to hug him, to kiss him, but it’s obvious that even the smallest of touches made him uncomfortable.

“What’s going on in that big brain of yours, Jonny?” He whispers, ducking his head a little in an attempt to catch his eye. Jonathan barely glances over at him, head still and eyes scanning over his face before returning to their previous position. If it weren’t for his eyes and restless fingers, Steve might have thought he was comatose.

“Mr. Byers?” A nurse steps in the room and flicks on the light, Steve watches Jonathan’s eyes squeeze shut and his hands come up to cover his face.

“Lights off, it hurts his eyes, I think.” He explains, the woman nods hurriedly and flips the switch once more.

“I just came to check in on him, do you mind?” She takes a step into the room, Steve shakes his head and turns his eyes back to Jonathan, who’s blinking rapidly down at his sheets and occasionally rubbing at his eyes. He jumps a little when the nurse gets closer, Steve holds out his hand and Jonathan gives it quite the glare before settling his palm into it and squeezing gently.

“Any pain, Mr. Byers?” She asks as she looks over the IV bags and checks his vitals, Jonathan fiddles with the little plastic doohickey on his finger that monitored his pulse. Steve had gotten the noise turned down when Jonathan wouldn’t stop glaring at it. Jonathan doesn’t reply to the woman, so the nurse looks to Steve, who shrugs.

“I can barely get him to stay in the bed, don’t look at me.” He snorts; she rolls her eyes and taps at the line leading to the IV. “How long do you think he’ll be here?” He questions curiously, the woman sighs and shakes her head.

“At least a week, it’ll take a while for the antibiotics and the fluids to take effect. He’ll be out in two weeks tops, if the doctor doesn’t find him a threat to himself or others or any other problems occur.” She tells him, and Steve looks to Jonathan with worry. That might raise some red flags, Jonathan was obviously unstable, and he seemed ready to hurt anyone that he thought might hurt him.

Jonathan looks up at him and stares at him for a long

moment, eyes slightly squinted and scanning over his face with a perplexed expression. Steve would give anything to know what was going through his head in that moment, what sort of hell was locked inside that skull?

The nurse leaves, she says something but he can't quite find the energy to actually listen, he simply leans forward and settles his arms on the side of the bed. Jonathan turns his eyes back to his lap, scratching at one of the scars on his arms roughly. He'd been doing that for some reason, and what seemed like a simple itch would quickly turn into him scratching skin away like it was nothing.

"Don't do that, Jonny." He scolds quietly, Jonathan's hand freezes and he huffs before throwing his hands down in an almost over exaggerated gesture. "Why aren't you talking?" He finally says softly, Jonathan turns his head towards him once more. "Are you mute or something?" He whispers desperately, tilting his head to the side, Jonathan's eyebrows twitch and his eyes expression is as blank as ever.

"Please, something, can you give me something?" He pleads timidly, Jonathan continues to stare at him for a long moment and he sighs. Steve drops his head down onto his arms and groaning in exhaustion.

A hand suddenly settles itself carefully in his hair, shaking a little and cautious, but making steady movements through Steve's long locks. It felt like Jonathan was jerking him around, just as soon as he was sure the guy he knew was gone, he went and did shit like this. He wasn't sure whether to cry or laugh, it was just such an emotional rollercoaster, but at the same time he knew it was ten times worse for Jonathan.

Jonathan makes a cough of a noise, swallowing so roughly that Steve can hear it. The first syllable of a word has him jerking upright to look at the younger boy, who seems to be struggling to simply get the noise out.

"M'so-rry." The words are a jumbled mess of hoarse, shaky, cracking noises, but Steve's positive he's never heard something so beautiful in his life. He smiles so bright his cheeks are already beginning to ache from quite a bit of disuse.

"Sorry, what are you sorry for?" He whispers, reaching out gently and taking Jonathan's cold hand into his own. Jonathan frowns at him and he looks so irrevocably sad in that moment, eyes shining a bit as Steve squeezes his hand. Jonathan shakes his head, glancing away and scratching at his cheek.

Someone steps up to the door of the room, Steve glances up and finds Dustin and Lucas standing before them. He can see the moment the happiness and relief leave their eyes at the sight of Jonathan, and he can remember the heart-wrenching pain he'd felt in that moment just earlier today.

"Hey guys," He mutters, looking over at Jonathan, who was staring at the boys intensely. "It's Dustin and Lucas, man." He reminds, Jonathan looks over at him with a blank expression and Steve is left to wonder how much of Jonathan was actually left to remember these guys.

"Can we come in?" Dustin asks politely, and Steve knows they'd been debriefed by Hopper.

“Yeah, that’s cool.” He assures, squeezing Jonathan’s hand gently and watching his face as the boys step closer.

“Hey Jonathan,” Lucas greets hesitantly, both boys look scared out of their wits, like they weren’t sure whether Jonathan might kill them or be afraid of them. For a moment, they all just stare at one another, and then Jonathan reaches out. Dustin flinches a little but doesn’t step back, Jonathan takes his hat from his head and frowns at it as he lowers it into his lap.

“Steve got me that one, I lost mine in the woods the day-“ He gets elbowed by Lucas for that, but Jonathan doesn’t seem to notice, he’s just staring down at the hat. It was a lot like Dustin’s old one, but not exactly the same, where it had been blue it was purple. “It’s not the same, but it’s close enough.” He tells him with a nod; Jonathan looks back up at him and then holds out the hat.

“It’s good to see you, Jonathan.” Lucas tells him quietly, smiling a little. Dustin nods his head once more and then slips the hat back onto his head with a grin.

“Really good, man, we missed you.” He promises, Jonathan simply returns to staring at his lap. They look to Steve in confusion and concern, he shrugs.

“I think he’s just tired,” He offers optimistically, the boys nod their heads.

“Mike and Elle are gonna stop by, I think.” Lucas says to Steve awkwardly, eyes lowering and scanning along the threaded

blanket that was resting over Jonathan's lower half.

"Well that's good, right, Jonny?" Steve reaches out and settles his hand on top of Jonathan's, the young man makes a tired sigh of a noise and reaches up to run his hand through his hair. The push of his hair reveals his temples, they have circular red and scabbed over burn marks on them, and just the sight of them makes Steve want to crush him in a hug.

"What happened there?" Dustin asks gently, reaching up and pointing towards Jonathan, who flinches a little. Lucas jabs him in the side, Steve shoots the boy a glare. Jonathan seems to be pondering this question, he reaches up and his fingers brush over the marring on his left temple. His left eye squints up in a wince and he lowers his hand, he turns his eyes back to the boys.

"St-Stay awake," Jonathan murmurs, Lucas and Dustin look to Steve with wide and alarmed eyes. Steve frowns and leans forward, squeezing Jonathan's hand gently between his own.

"What do you mean, dude?" He asks when the young man looks at him in response, Jonathan shrugs uncomfortably and reaches up with his free hand to rub at his eye. Steve sighs, dropping his forehead against their twined hands and squeezing his eyes shut. "You guys should probably get going; you can come back with Will tomorrow or something." He mutters, listening to the boys stand up from their places on the other side of the bed.

"Bye Jonathan," Lucas murmurs, Dustin echoes him and they walk out quietly.

-

"What's going on?" Jim mutters into the phone to his colleague, who had called and said it was an emergency. Jim had shooed the boys off to Jonathan's room, hoping that Jonathan could handle other visitors.

"Chief, you gotta get down here." The man says on the other line, he frowns and glances around with well-founded paranoia. *"That bag the kid had, it's... Jesus Christ."* The man says in awe, or maybe horror, Jim rubs his eyes with one hand and sighs.

"Don't go through anything else, keep it in my office. I'll be over there soon." He promises quietly, the man agrees, albeit hesitantly, and they hang up. He turns on his heel and finds Elle and Mike walking through the front doors. "Why can't you guys just be normal kids and play tag?" He demands in exasperation at the sight of them, Elle smiles and Mike shrugs as they approach.

"Not as fun as getting into government investigations and going on perilous adventures." The boy tells him with a smirk, crossing his arms and looking up at Jim. He'd grown a lot, at fourteen years old he was slowly gaining in height; it wouldn't be long before he was as tall as Hopper, maybe taller.

"Elle, sweetheart, I told you to go to Mike's, not bring him here." He explains, the girl nods and sticks her hands in her jacket pockets casually.

"We promised to meet up here; I wanted to know what's

going on.” Mike tells Hopper in explanation, the man drags his hand down his face and sighs once more, exhausted.

“Elle can show you the room; you can stay for a few minutes. Stay quiet, listen to Steve, and meet me back out here in a few minutes. I’m driving you both back to your house and you’re staying there until I come to pick you up.” He says sternly, the kids nod eagerly and Elle takes Mike by the hand and leads him off down the hall.

He needed to watch out for that boy, it wouldn’t be long before puberty and…

No, no, he couldn’t think about that right now. He was having enough problems as it is, he didn’t need to worry about impending doom.

-

“How is he?” Mike asks as he approaches the room and finds Lucas and Dustin exiting. The boys share duel nervous looks and shrug their shoulders in unison.

“Bad, I guess.” Dustin says quietly, taking off his hat and running his fingers over the bill anxiously. “Not like Will was, not even like Elev- I mean Elle.” He explains, offering an apologetic look to the girl, who simply smiles in reassurance that she wasn’t offended. They had only recently decided that it would be best to refer to her as Elle only; it was weird to call her Eleven.

“He’s bad, I don’t think Will or his mom are gonna be too happy. He’s weird, like beyond Jonathan’s brand of weird.” Lucas elaborates, glancing back at the room door. “We’re gonna head back to your place, we’ll wait for you.” He offers, Mike holds up his hand and shakes his head.

“Hop’s taking us back.” Elle interrupts, and Mike nods his head in agreement.

“Be careful, Mike, you might end up the next body in the woods if Hopper has anything to do with it.” Dustin smirks, Mike swats at his shoulder to shut him up and the boys snicker as they step away.

“Why would Dustin say that?” Elle questions before Mike can start walking again; he laughs awkwardly and rubs the back of his neck as a blush begins to build in his cheeks.

“They’re kidding, don’t worry about it.” He turns on his heel and steps inside, Elle following behind him. Mike falters in his steps as he spots Jonathan, they weren’t kidding when they said he was bad, he glances back at Elle. The girl looks at him with a weak smile and he returns it, their little reassurance to one another.

“Hey guys,” Steve is resting his chin on his hands, both are wrapped around one of Jonathan’s.

“Hi.” Mike greets uneasily, Elle mimics him and Jonathan

looks up at them. There's a moment where he just stares, eyes empty and face unmoving, but then something flickers in his eyes as they focus on Elle.

"Eleven." He croaks out quietly, Steve looks surprised and possibly a little hurt; Elle smiles brightly before stepping forward to the bed. Jonathan holds his hand out hesitantly and the girl places her hand in it and squeezes it gently.

"Hi Jonathan," She greets quietly, the young man is staring at her as if he's the one looking at someone who was previously thought of as dead. Mike can't help but feel out of place, Jonathan can't keep his eyes off of the girl, and it's as if he's looking at a ghost. "Are you okay?" She questions, he frowns at her as if he doesn't understand and then glances over at Steve for some reason.

Mike's eyes lift up to watch the heart monitor, which seems to be speeding up silently. Jonathan's hand slips away from Elle's and he ducks his head and covers his eyes, making a ragged gasp of a noise. It reminds Mike of Will's night terrors, like the beginnings of a hyperventilating fit and the precursor to lots of screaming.

"Jonny?" Steve lifts out of his chair; Jonathan sobs brokenly and tugs his hand away from Steve's. "Jonathan, hey, what's going on?" He asks gently, looking to Mike and Elle with confusion. Elle steps back, as if she's been burned, her hands clasping together and curling up to her chest protectively. Mike wraps an arm around her and she startles.

-

Jonathan sounds like he's choking, hands over his face and body tensing up rigidly. Steve is rubbing at his back and shushing him quietly, trying and failing to calm him down. When he reaches for Jonathan's hand he earns a hard shove away before Jonathan jumps up from the bed and leaps off. His arm jerks a little and his IV line tears out, blood spilling from his hand, onto the sheets and trailing behind him as he staggers across the room.

"Jonathan, shit!" Steve holds his hand out in a peaceful gesture, eyes wide and worried as the younger man backs himself up to a wall and sinks down onto the floor. Jonathan hiccups and wipes at his pink, tear stained face, curling his uninjured arm (the term would be used loosely considering the scars and scabs along both of them) around his knees and the bloody one between his chest and his legs.

"Hey, what's going on here?" A nurse asks as she steps in, she spots Jonathan curled in a ball and she sighs. "Everyone out," She demands, Mike and Elle scramble out of the room. Steve shakes his head when the woman looks to him, expecting him to leave.

"I'm not leaving him," He says sternly, she gives him quite the look and steps forward a little.

"Jonathan, sweetheart, you need to get back into bed." She says, crouching down a little, Jonathan glances towards her and begins to scoot along the wall away from her in a scrabble of uncoordinated limbs, leaving blood smears in his wake. The woman looks to Steve with a harsh glare and she points to the door. "You need to leave, right now." She instructs firmly, he doesn't move from his spot. Another nurse steps in and the first nurse turns to her with a

frown. “Call security.” She tells the other woman, who nods and steps out of the room.

“What the hell is going on?” Jim steps into the room, Steve can see Mike and Elle standing in the hall. He felt thankful that they had most likely fetched Jim for back up; he wouldn’t let them kick Steve out.

“You all have to leave, the patient needs rest.” The nurse says with agitation as she shoots Steve quite the look, Steve fixes her with an equally angry glare and plants his feet firmly. They’d have to drag him out kicking and screaming, he was sure of that.

“No!” Steve jumps at the voice, turning his head and finding Jonathan still huddled in the corner, his eyes wide and glassy, but looking slightly more lucid. He’s looking between the nurse and Steve, the latter takes a step over to Jonathan and crouches down. The young man is a mess, new blood stained all over him and his face smeared with tears and a few streaks of crimson from his hands.

“Hey, Jonny.” He holds out his hand, Jonathan doesn’t flinch this time before taking it. His palm is trembling and sticky with blood, but Steve doesn’t hesitate to hold it firmly.

“Don’t go,” Jonathan begs, tears in his eyes and desperation written all over his features. The pure emotion in his eyes, the fear, it’s an exact replica of them the day he’d been shot. Steve knows right then that this is *his* Jonathan, he knows that he hasn’t lost him completely.

“I’m not, I promise.” He assures, reaching out his other hand and pulling Jonathan to his feet. Jonathan fists his uninjured hand in Steve’s shirt and standing very close to him. He turns his head to the nurse and Hopper, rubbing his hand up and down Jonathan’s back. “He’ll either escape or die trying within a day if you don’t let me stay.” He says confidently, just as the security guards are rushing in. As soon as two security guards push past Hopper, Jonathan starts screaming.

This wasn’t a short yell, this was petrified, a noise of pure fear that shocked Steve into going completely still. Everyone freezes up, even the security; Jonathan falls back onto the floor, curls up and throws his arms over his head like he’s under fire.

“Out, get out.” Jim says with a point of his finger to the door, the two security men look to the nurse for reassurance and she waves them away without a word. Steve leans down again, dropping down onto his knees this time and trying to calm Jonathan down once more.

“Jonny, hey,” Jonathan shoves at Steve’s hands and his chest when Steve tries to touch him, hitting out at him in frustration and distress. Steve grabs hold of his wrists and holds them steady, Jonathan begins to pull and kick his legs out. The older boy narrowly avoids a foot to his crotch and when he sees the nurse approaching with a needle, he shoots her a warning look. She sets the needle down on a cart and steps back once more.

“You can’t make me!” Jonathan insists with his eyes squeezed shut as he thrashes desperately. “Let me go!” He demands with a croak, Steve releases his hands, Jonathan falls back onto his back with a soft grunt. The young man is panting with exhaustion and somehow has managed to get paler in his efforts, there are pink

splotches on his face and he looks both like a scared kid and a wild animal.

"I'm sorry, Jonathan." He mutters as Jonathan catches his breath and begins to recover, glancing warily around the room, his eyes fall onto Jim and the nurse on the other side of the room before seeking out Steve. "You okay?" He asks gently, Jonathan takes in a few ragged breaths and continues to stare at him.

"Get him back in the bed, if you can." The nurse instructs, and Steve feels relieved that she's allowing him to take the reins on this.

"Come on, dude, that floor can't be comfortable, especially with that gown." He reaches out again and Jonathan flinches in the slightest but allows the older boy to help him up again. Steve helps him balance for a moment, Jonathan was obviously off-kilter and weak with exhaustion, he leans against Steve for support.

"This kid," Jim points his finger at Steve whilst keeping his eyes on the nurse. "He doesn't leave Jonathan's side, all right? That kid is my responsibility and I'm the current health care proxy and all that, yadda yadda yadda." He waves his arm in a carefree motion and then props both hands on his hips. "You listen to him now, because everyone here is going to listen to me and I say listen to Steve." He says sternly.

"I'm sorry, sir, it's just not a good idea to have a civilian in with a patient that should be resting." The woman tells him politely with a forced smile; Steve helps Jonathan back over to the bed and sits him down in the chair. He grabs the rag that he was cleaning Jonathan with earlier and begins wiping at his blood and tear stained

face.

"Does that look like someone that's trying to cause damage?" Jim gestures towards the two teens near the bed and she turns her head and sighs. "Trust me when I say that he's helping more than hurting." He promises sincerely.

"I'll talk to my supervisor and Dr. Reilly," She says after a moment, adjusting her shirt and touching the messy bun on the back of her head. Steve felt bad for her, she was just trying to do her job, but so were Steve and Jim. "I'll send in someone with new sheets and we'll get him resettled if he'll allow it." She explains to them quietly, Jim holds out his hand and she shakes it gently.

"Thank you," He says seriously.

"Thanks," Steve calls as she walks out, and then returns his attention to Jonathan. "I'm sorry I grabbed you, man." He says quietly, tipping his head to the side in an attempt to meet Jonathan's downturned eyes. Jonathan doesn't respond, staring catatonically into nothing, past Steve and a million miles away. He sighs and takes Jonathan's arm, wiping the blood from their hands quietly.

"I have to go for a while, I'll be back." Jim tells him as he approaches the bed quietly. Steve glances over at the older man and nods his head slowly. "You call me if anything happens, all right?" He instructs, Steve agrees with another nod.

"When do you think Will and Ms. B are gonna get here?" He asks hesitantly, Jim shrugs his shoulders and runs his hand over

his short and thin hair.

"Sometime tonight." He says vaguely.

"I'm not leaving him alone, you gotta convince them to let me stay overnight, at least until they get here." He insists, Jim holds up his hands in a sort of 'slow down' gesture before sinking down into the chair opposite of them.

"I'm all for this, I am." He promises softly, leaning forward and resting his arms on the bed. "If you were his girlfriend, they wouldn't be as resisting, you gotta realize that." He murmurs awkwardly, Steve glares at him before returning his focus on Jonathan's bloody hands.

"I'm his boyfriend," He seethes, Jim sighs and drops his head down onto his arms. "I don't give a shit what anyone else says, that should mean something." He insists, Jim props his chin on his arms and they stare at each other for a long moment.

"I know, as much as I don't get it, I get it." He says rather vaguely, turning his eyes to Jonathan, who was still sitting as still as a statue. "I know what it's like to love someone, so I'm gonna keep you here with him." He swears with his usual frown, sitting up slowly. "Besides, they can't argue that they can handle him better than you. He'd throw a fit if anyone but you got near him and we both know it." He mutters, Steve follows his gaze back to Jonathan.

"Yeah," Steve agrees weakly, eyes burning a little with unshed tears.

“I should have believed you, those assholes are gonna get what’s coming to them.” He promises gruffly, reaching over and patting the young man’s shoulder

“Thanks, Chief.” He says quietly, the man nods his head and gets to his feet.

“You’re welcome, kid.”

-

Mike and Elle hightailed it out of the hospital as soon as Jonathan started freaking out; Mike had practically dragged Elle along behind him by the hand. The girl was visibly shaken as they step outside; Lucas and Dustin are hovering outside despite their earlier agreements to go ahead of them.

“What happened?” Dustin questions from his bike, Mike leads Elle over to them and runs a hand through his hair.

“I don’t know, Jonathan started freaking out.” Mike looks to Elle for any sort of information, but the girl is staring off into space with a haunted look on her face. “Elle, what happened?” He murmurs, stepping closer to her and touching her shoulder. The girl jumps a little and looks to them with wide, frantic eyes. “Elle?” He rubs his thumb over her shoulder soothingly and she sniffles a little before wiping at teary eyes.

“I saw it again,” She tells them softly, Mike frowns at her and looks to his other friends, who seem just as lost. “The bad place, Jonathan in the bad place!” She exclaims with a hiccup, face red and tears still threatening to spill over onto her cheeks.

“What do you mean?” Dustin questions in confusion, she scrubs at her eyes in frustration and then takes in a deep breath.

“Jonathan was in the bad place, he ran away, like me.” She whispers, taking Mike’s hand when he offers it to her for comfort. They move over to where their bikes are parked, standing in a close circle.

“How do you know?” Lucas asks with concern, she reaches up and presses a finger to her temple.

“In here.” She taps her finger to her head and they all fall into a hush, only the sound of a few people going in and out of the hospital a few feet away. “Papa hurt him.” Mike can hear his heart in his ears as they all blink at one another in surprise.

“Papa? That dickhead? Bu-But he’s dead.” Dustin cuts in with a wave of his hands and an alarmed look on his face.

“He was there!” Elle insists with a frown, tugging on her purple jacket anxiously as she looks around. “Jonathan ran away, they were…” She frowns and reaches up to fiddle with her bangs. “They were gonna make him dead.” She tells them softly, and Mike’s

eyes widen.

"They were gonna kill him?" Dustin hisses, Elle nods and points to him as if to convey that he had taken the words from her mouth.

"Papa said they didn't need him anymore." She whispers as Mike glances back towards the hospital door. "He said Jonathan was falling to pieces." She uses the words as if they're foreign to her, looking to Mike to explain.

"Uh, falling to pieces means like…" He looks to Lucas and Dustin, who shrug without any sort of answer. "If something falls to pieces it usually means everything gets all messed up… I guess Jonathan was getting sick, I mean, he looks pretty bad." He explains, the other two boys nod their heads in agreement.

"That's mean." Elle says firmly with a scowl, Mike nods his head and freezes up when Elle suddenly hugs him. He hugs her back after a moment, glaring as Dustin and Lucas start making quiet kissing gestures towards him. He flips them off, then smiles as Elle steps back. "Jonathan kept saying… They made a deal, papa said he was gonna break it." She murmurs, the boys shoot each other worried looks.

"I think you should tell the Chief what you saw," Lucas offers, and Mike nods his head and looks to the girl.

"I can't…" She hisses, the boys stare at her in surprise.

“Why not?” Dustin demands, Elle glances down in what seems to be shame.

“Jonathan did bad things,” She whispers almost inaudibly, Mike steps a little closer to the girl as she crosses her arms self-consciously.

“What kind of bad things?” Lucas inquires; the girl gives a shaky sigh and looks up at them for a moment before glaring back down at the ground with a shake of her head.

“He’ll go to jail.” She insists.

“Jonathan won’t go to jail; the Chief won’t let that happen.” Mike assures her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. While all of them were getting taller, Mike was soon to tower over all of them, he had about an inch on all of them so Elle fit snugly against his side.

“He killed people,” She murmurs, reaching up and touching Mike’s hand that’s hanging over her shoulder. “A lot of people… when he ran away.” She admits hesitantly.

“Then he had to,” Mike insists, looking to his other friends for back up, they nod their agreement.

“Jonathan wouldn’t hurt anyone unless he has to,” Lucas promises, and Elle doesn’t seem very convinced by their words, but she nods anyway.

“Okay,” She agrees quietly, just as Hopper steps out of the front doors. They watch the man run a hand through his thinning hair and scratch at his beard as he stands at the edge of the sidewalk. Elle gives the boys a final look before she turns and walks towards him, the boys gather up their bikes as the girl walks to the patrol car with Hopper’s hand on her back.

He turns just as Elle slips around to get in the passenger seat, pointing to the boys.

“You behave yourselves, you hear?” He calls out; they nod their heads and wave.

-

“What were you freaking out about over the phone?” He demands as he steps over to Officer Powell’s desk, propping his hands on his hips and giving him a stern look. Powell shakes his head and points towards the hall with a sort of uneasy look on his face.

“It’s in your office, Chief, just check it out.” He mutters, returning to his crossword puzzle. Jim rolls his eyes and mumbles under his breath about useless colleagues before storming down the hall and into his office. The bag Jonathan had over his shoulder is resting on his desk, Jim closes his door quietly and then steps forward hesitantly. He had just discussed another one of Elle’s visions

with the young girl, he knew these were unusual for her and it made him nervous. It felt like just when things were stabilizing, everything would get thrown out of whack. He didn't want to open this bag, he didn't want anyone he cared about involved with this, but he just supposed that wasn't in their cards.

"Better be good," He sighs to himself as he unzips the bag carefully, pulling the opening wide so he can see the contents of the bag. There are a few empty snack bags and wrappers, some old newspapers, but underneath them hold an odd sight. Jim takes hold of a VCR tape near the bottom, lifting it out and turning it over to observe it. The label is blank; he steps over to his TV and slips the tape into the VCR.

Jim rewinds the tape, and then after it reaches the beginning he hits play. There's static at first, then it glitches and there's a view similar to a security camera, he frowns. At first, it's just a hallway, a long white hallway with a few doors on either side of the corridor. He starts to slowly forward the tape, wondering if Powell was just screwing around with him, but then he sees something and he pulls it back a little, hits play.

A figure comes stumbling around the end of the hallway, one hand on the wall and dragging dark smears behind it. He squints his eyes at the blurry figure, watching as they disappear beyond sight, he scrambles forward and begins to fast forward again. He has to quickly press play when more figures come into view, it appears to be a couple of security guards rushing down the hall after the figure.

"Jesus," He whispers, stopping the tape and pulling it out before going back to the bag. He digs through the tapes and grabs another, this one also blank, and he pops it in. There's a sort of lobby, the view of two corridors on either side of a desk where a young

woman sits. He forwards once more, fingers rapping impatiently on the top of the TV as he leans closer.

He presses play at the first sight of new movement, watching what he now knows for sure is Jonathan Byers staggering out of the left corridor. He has something in his hands; he's dressed in white clothes that are stained a dark color on the sleeves and the chest. The woman at the desk jumps up and then falls back out of her chair just as Jonathan jerks, he has a gun in his hands.

He *shot* the woman.

"Shit, shit, shit." Jim presses his fingers to either side of the screen and watches as Jonathan turns and stumbles backwards as the security guards herd out. There are less of them this time, and Jim is afraid to know what happened to the others. Jonathan jerks again; a security guard topples backwards and hits the wall, falling limp. The security guards have their guns out as well, but they aren't shooting for some reason, Jonathan takes a step back towards what Jim figures is the front door out of view.

Jim's breathing hitches as Jonathan holds up the gun again and there's no kickback, he shakes his gun and then drops it to the side. The guards begin to move in closer and Jonathan falls back onto the floor, helpless and unarmed as they close in on the young man. He brings his hands up over his head; Jim bites his lip in anticipation.

There's a glitch in the screen, the image freezes a little and then turns to pieces before it returns to normal. The image on the screen has changed drastically during the glitch. Guards are strewn out along the room, splatters on the wall in black and white are obviously blood, and Jonathan is still on the ground in his huddled

position. Jim blinks, rewinds, and then plays it back again. Nothing changes, there's a small glitch in the screen, and he watches the time frame. It's only seconds apart, how in the hell could he have torn everyone apart like that?

Jonathan picks himself up slowly, hands slipping in blood and limbs looking more like quivering bones than actual human body parts. He stands up, head ducked in the slightest as his head swivels about to observe the room. He turns slightly and there's another glitch on the screen near the bottom left, almost as if Jonathan could sense the glitch in the video was going to be there. He holds his hand out and the glitch moves across the screen, almost like a small figure heading towards him. It collides with Jonathan's hand and then disappears, and Jonathan slowly looks up at the camera. The young man turns and scrambles across the room, jumping over bodies and sliding through blood clumsily before racing down the right corridor.

"What have you done?" He whispers, waiting a moment to see Jonathan again, except the tape ends suddenly and he realizes that Jonathan had retrieved the tapes, like he was covering up evidence. In a time of severe stress and panic, he'd had the mind to hunt down the security tapes?

He takes out the tape and finds a labelled tape, frowning down at the quick and messy handwriting.

Trial 76: Subject 24 Tape #3

Jim feels anxiety swirling in his chest as he pushes the tape in and presses play, this one requiring no rewind this time. The camera clicks on and shows a lab of some sort, a few people are just in the frame and there's a treadmill in plain view. Jonathan is standing on it, bent over against the frame with a few wires and

things stuck onto him.

"Trial 76: Subject 24." A man's voice says in a monotone. "*We are going on three hours of exposure to the substance; subject has reported loss of feeling in hands and feet and blurriness of vision."* The man explains, Jonathan twitches a little and his head props up on his arm to look behind the camera towards what Jim figures is the man behind it. The film has much better resollution; it's easier to see the sweat on Jonathan's face and the exhaustion written all over him.

"All right, that's five minutes. Nurse, start it up again and do Question Series #10." He requests, Jonathan stands up a little and the treadmill starts up. *"Hands off of the frame, Twenty-Four."* Jim blinks in surprise as Jonathan complies; he called the young man by his number, just like Elle had been labelled Eleven.

A figure is just at the edge of the camera view in front of the treadmill, only their arms visible as they hold up cards.

"Spell the word 'microwave'." A woman's voice requests, Jonathan's head drops forward a little and he clears his throat.

"M… I…. C…" Jonathan coughs, stumbles, grips the frame of the treadmill. He rights himself, gaining his pace back and letting go of the frame. *"C-Can I… start over?"* He rasps between pants, apparently the nurse must nod her head. *"What was... the question?"* He inquires, the man behind the camera sighs.

"Loss of memory is consistent and slowly increasing in severity." The man states, Jonathan's head twitches towards him but

then returns to face the front.

"I'm going to give you a list of words; I want you to repeat them back to me in a reverse order." The nurse says, skipping the last question. *"Dog, car, baseball and leaf."* She lists simply; Jonathan nods his head and the woman with the cards gestures at him. *"Go ahead."* She urges, Jonathan's hands come up to touch the frame and his head twists to look at the man behind the camera for a split second before his hands retract once more.

"Uh… L-Leaf…" His slow jog is gradually increasing in pace, his arms pumping unevenly and they occasionally try to rest on the frame but then quickly correct themselves. *"F-Flower,"* He suddenly drops down onto his knees with a loud grunt and then he's swiped out of view by the fast moving treadmill with a clatter of a noise. The nurse rushes around to the side and crouches down where he'd disappeared.

"He's seizing again, sir." The woman informs the man behind the camera, who sighs.

"All right, stabilize him and take him back to the room. We can't get through a simple test without him losing it anymore." The man says with frustration lacing his voice, Jim tightens his fingers around the frame of the TV and grits his jaw. The tape ends and the screen goes blue, Jim can see his scowling reflection in it. Yeah, he was definitely going to tear someone to shreds for this. He'd start with his middle man and work his way up, he was going to bust some heads.

-

Steve spends the evening with Jonathan trying to get him acclimated to the whole hospital vibe. He gets dinner, which looks like a mess, but Jonathan picks at it and even eats all of his Jell-O cup. Steve gets permission to take Jonathan into the bathroom and clean him up a little better, has him sit in a chair and lean his head back in the sink so Steve can wash some of the dirt and grease from his hair. After a bit of cleaning, he looks a little more human somehow.

It takes Steve a full four hours just to get Jonathan asleep, it's just after two in the morning when he finally dozes off and the older boy says a quiet prayer in thanks. Jonathan seemed tired, it was just that every time he would begin to nod off, his head would jerk and he'd startle. Steve wasn't sure if it was trauma or just his self-preservation out of whack, maybe both.

Steve can't help but shut off the light above the bed and rest his head and hand on Jonathan's arm, closing his eyes and deciding to take a quick nap himself. It had been such a long day that even hunched over in a chair was a position he could sleep in, although he supposed he used to sleep like this all the time in high school.

His graduation pops into his head suddenly he can remember walking up to grab his diploma and smiling for the crowd. Will and Joyce had been in the crowd, they had come for him although he never asked them to, but he was grateful nonetheless to see their excited faces. His parents had been there, his father had scolded him for not being in the honors row and his mother had told him that he ruined the picture by not showing his teeth when he smiled. Nancy had gotten valedictorian, Steve had never been so proud of someone before. But those victories were hollow, because there was a heavy silence in his head between the names Jacob Buckley and Diana Crow. He should have been there, and by that point Steve had started to accept that he was dead and never coming

back.

"I'm sorry I stopped believing," He whispers almost inaudibly, stroking his thumb gently over the marred skin of his boyfriend's arm. He turns his head a little and stares up at Jonathan's sleeping face, hair messy and hanging just along his eyes and mouth slightly open. Steve finds comfort in the sight of him, maybe he was a little jagged around the edges, but that was what he was drawn to in the first place. This was his Jonathan, and that's all that mattered.

He swears he only closes his eyes for a second; before he's jolted awake by screaming.

Steve's head jerks up and he's immediately alert, looking for a source of alarm and finding nothing but a dark and empty room. He turns his head and finds Jonathan thrashing in his bed; he quickly flicks the light above the bed on before leaning over the bed in an attempt to catch his attention. The door to the room opens and the nurse from earlier leans in, looking concerned, Steve holds his hand up to reassure her.

Jonathan's eyes are squeezed shut and he pushes and hits at Steve when he tries to get close, it must be a reflex but it doesn't do much considering how weak the young man is. The screaming has stopped at least; leaving only panicked gasping in its place.

"Jonathan, it's me!" He hisses, trying to restrain him without freaking him out any more, but Jonathan continues to push at him and try to move himself the other way. "Jonny, open your eyes, it was a nightmare!" He watches Jonathan's eyes squint open at that, his limbs stilling in their thrashing as his eyes scan the room carefully. Steve turns his head, the nurse is still watching, but she

offers a small nod before slipping out of the room. “It’s okay, baby, you’re here with me.” He sinks down into his chair and watches Jonathan catch his breath and looks around warily with teary eyes. Steve had never used that term of endearment with Jonathan before but he felt like it was needed somehow.

Steve runs his hands over his face and up into his hair, sighing quietly and stretching his legs out as he squeezes his eyes shut with exhaustion. He startles a little when a hand brushes against his elbow, he opens tired eyes and finds Jonathan leaning out of his bed and reaching for him with a determined look on his face.

“What?” He murmurs, leaning forward a little, Jonathan’s hand snags his sleeve and tugs. Steve stands up to follow his pulling, he places his hand over Jonathan’s when his thighs hit the bed. “I don’t speak mime, Jonny.” He jokes weakly, earning quite the look from Jonathan that makes him laugh quietly. It seemed so very Jonathan, that ‘done with you’ look that Steve adored so much.

Jonathan tugs on him again and all Steve can do is pick up his leg to rest his knee on the bed. Jonathan scoots over to the side and pushes the covers down; Steve shakes his head in response. Jonathan wanted him to sleep in the bed with him apparently, which was odd considering he didn’t seem to like being touched very much at the moment.

“You sure, dude? It’s a small bed.” He warns, Jonathan tugs insistently on him and Steve sighs before climbing onto the bed. He kicks off his shoes and slips his sock covered feet under the scratchy hospital sheets hesitantly. Jonathan looks pleased with himself; he lies down on his side and pulls Steve down onto his back. “Okay, here we go.” Steve smiles a little and Jonathan drops his head down onto the pillow with a straight face.

Steve falls silent as he adjusts himself a bit and he squints up at the small fluorescent light above, he reaches back to shut it off. As soon as it goes dark, he feels Jonathan's hand grip tightly into his shirt and his breathing begins to pick up. Steve throws his hand back out and flicks the light on, Jonathan's eyes are squeezed shut and his body is rigid.

"Hey, hey it's okay." He comforts softly, Jonathan opens one eye hesitantly and gradually begins to visibly relax. "Lights on, I get it." He breathes a sigh of relief when Jonathan nods his head against his pillow and his fist in Steve's shirt loosens slightly. Steve drops his head back onto the pillow and settles one of his hands on top of the one resting on his chest. He wishes that Jonathan would want to cuddle with him like he used to, but there was a specific amount of space between them placed there by the younger man and Steve was going to respect it.

He turns his head a little, finding Jonathan staring at him silently, he knew he should be creeped out but Jonathan had a habit of staring before all of this so he only found it comforting. He smiles again and Jonathan's hand twitches a little in his grasp before his head moves forward. He tips his head to rest his forehead against Steve's shoulder; Steve squeezes the hand in his and closes his eyes.

"Night, Jonny." He mumbles.

-

Joyce is restless, she hadn't slept a wink and spent the night tossing and turning in her bed. Jim had come over and

explained to her about what was going on, how Jonathan was doing and the way he was acting. Joyce had immediately wanted to see him, but by the time she'd gotten home they had called the front desk and the nurse that spoke with them recommended just letting Jonathan sleep. Steve was there with him, and apparently it had taken quite a while to get him to sleep. She trusted Steve to take care of Jonathan, and she hadn't wanted to stress him out so late in the evening, he'd had a rough day. Hell, he'd had a rough couple of years.

So now they were heading to the hospital at five in the morning and Joyce was more than ready to see her son. Hopper had repeatedly told them to prepare themselves, so Joyce was both anxious and expecting the worse, but what could be worse than having her boy alive?

They enter the hospital; Will keeps a few steps ahead of her, continuously glancing back at Hopper and his mother to make sure they were still behind him. He had kept his brother's camera close to him since his supposed demise, it rarely left his neck, and it was there now. He had chattered all the way home on how he was looking forward to giving it back. They reach the room and Joyce snags her son by the back of his shirt gently, he shuffles to the side next to the door and they both look to Hopper.

"Go ahead," He nods, and Will has his hand on the knob before Joyce can even reach. He pushes the door open carefully; stepping into the room and holding the door open for his mother and Hopper. Joyce places her hand on the door and slips into the room behind her son, eyes immediately finding the bed and the illuminated sleeping figures on it.

Jonathan isn't alone, and Joyce isn't really surprised that

Steve is the one laying right next to him. Steve is on his side in the small bed with Jonathan, one arm thrown over his waist and his mouth tucked against Jonathan's forehead. She can only see Jonathan's back, and for a moment it's still not real yet. Will is stone still just in front of her, Joyce steps around her youngest and to the edge of the bed.

From this vantage point she can actually see his face, pale and haggard, but it's her baby boy. There are scars along his arms, skin raised and pink and splotched with scabs, scrapes, and bruises. She sucks in a quiet gasp, falling still when Jonathan's hand twitches at his side. She watches his eyes open, become aware and alive and so real, not dead and gone and cold. He jerks a little, hand grabbing at Steve's arm and his head moving back to look at Steve. He stares at him for a long moment, then his eyes flicker over at his mother and he sits up.

"Jonathan," She whispers, tears in her eyes as she braces her hands against the frame of the foot of the bed. Jonathan's eyes scan over her, his expression calculating and almost wary before his gaze switches to the boy behind her.

"Hey, big brother." Joyce glances back at her youngest, watching him wave timidly. Jonathan's head is turned away again, looking down at the older boy sleeping next to him before shaking him without hesitancy. Steve makes a snort of a noise and shoots upright; Jonathan flinches back a little at the movement as Steve blinks tiredly.

"Ms. B, Li'l Byers, hey." He says groggily, wiping at his eyes and running his fingers through messy and tangled hair that was getting so long that the ends were beginning to brush against his shoulders. Jonathan pulls his legs up to his chest and keeps his eyes

on his mother and brother as he wraps his arms around his shins, chin dropping onto his knees.

There was something about his eyes, something that seemed foreign to the face she had spent seventeen years seeing. They seemed vacant, empty, but not unseeing.

"What time s'it?" Steve swings his legs around to slip off of the bed, Jonathan's arm shoots out immediately and his fingers tighten into a fist around his rolled up shirt sleeve. "I'm not leaving." He assures quietly, prying Jonathan's fingers from his shirt and squeezing it gently before standing up. "I'm just going to the bathroom, man." He smiles gently at Joyce and Will. "Your mom and Will are here, please do not pull anything." He murmurs to Jonathan before stepping over to the bathroom and closing the door behind him.

"Hi, honey." Joyce says quietly, stepping over to the bed and sinking down into one of the chairs. Will walks over and sits down on the edge of the bed, hands fidgeting anxiously in his lap. "How are you?" Joyce asks, trying to refrain from asking questions that might be a little too difficult at the moment.

Jonathan continues to stare at her, and it's starting to scare her a bit because it looks like he recognizes her but can't exactly place where he knows her from. Jim had said it didn't seem like he recognized him, but his own mother? Had he recognized Steve at all? Jonathan wasn't offering any sort of answer to these questions, just staring straight at them, through them almost.

"I brought you something," Will says, lifting the camera off of his neck by the strap and settling it on the bed in front of them.

Jonathan blinks down at it, and one of his scar covered hands trembles as it reaches out. He picks up the camera, turning it over in his hands for a moment, glancing up at the sound of the faucet in the bathroom turning on. Jonathan stares for a moment before returning his eyes down at the camera once more, his fingers tracing gently over the rim of the lens. He frowns a little, the first sight of expression on his face since Joyce had laid eyes on him today. He holds it out for Will, who shakes his head and tries to push it back towards him.

"No, it's yours, remember? I kept it for you." He says with a small smile, Jonathan frowns a little harder and shakes his head.

"Keep it," Jonathan's voice is hoarse, a quiet and crackly noise that almost wasn't coherent. But it was the first words he'd said to them, and it brings another wave of tears to Joyce's eyes as Will takes the camera gently and settles it in his lap.

"Thanks," Will whispers, smiling softly at his brother, Jonathan nods in response and then turns his head when Steve exits the bathroom with the flush of the toilet. He smiles tiredly at Joyce and Will before walking over and sinking down into the chair opposite the bed of Joyce's.

"They did some blood work but they didn't want to do much until you got here," Steve offers to Joyce, who nods her head and smiles gently.

"Did they say what they were expecting from all of this?" Joyce asks vaguely with a gesture, Steve shrugs his shoulders.

“He was dehydrated when he got here but they’ve had him on fluids, mostly.” He huffs, looking to Jonathan with a sort of teasing accusing expression. “Mr. Ninja here has ripped out his IV twice and ran away once,” He offers, Jonathan doesn’t look very embarrassed about this; he simply reaches out and towards the older boy until Steve offers his hand to him. Jonathan holds his hand gently, using his free hand to run through his messy hair. Joyce catches sight of a red mark on his temple and even though part of her wants to lean forward and look at it herself, she remains seated and restrains herself.

“Anything… permanent?” Will questions softly, although his eyes are on Jonathan. The young man is staring right back at him, but of course he doesn’t say a word.

“They need to examine him more, he can talk and I think he knows who we are.” He shrugs, and Jonathan’s head swivels to look over at him and Steve raises his eyebrows in question. “You know who we are, right?” He questions outright, Jonathan blinks and then turns his head away with a small nod. “They’re not sure what’s psychological and what’s physical, the doctor predicted a few things but they tried to MRI him and he had something implanted in his neck that kept them from doing anything.”

Jonathan startles a little at that, his hand reaching up as if to touch the back of his neck where a strip of gauze lay. Steve catches his hand gently before he can make contact, and when Jonathan looks at him with frustration, he simply fixes him with soft eyes.

“They took it out, you’re fine.” He murmurs, Jonathan seems to almost be relieved. He pulls the sheets up a little and sinks backwards onto his pillow with a tired sigh. “He’s on edge and exhausted, sleeping seems pretty hard, they’ll probably have to give

him some sedatives." Steve goes on to say, Jonathan sits upright suddenly with wide eyes and Steve grabs his arm. "Don't-"

Steve gets cut off when Jonathan brings his free arm around and slaps him hard in the face. Joyce and Will jump at the movement, shocked from the sudden violence against what seemed to be Jonathan's only source of safety up until now. Steve's face scrunches up a little with a grimace and he releases Jonathan's arm as the side of his face begins to turn pink. Jonathan tucks his previously grabbed arm to his chest protectively.

"Jonathan," Joyce says quietly with horror, Jonathan turns to look at her with a scowl. His hands are restlessly returning to his lap, his eyes blinking rapidly as he focuses his gaze downwards. He rubs his arm anxiously where Steve had grabbed him, Joyce knew without a doubt that it was a reflex. It pained her more than anything to know that her son, her pride and joy, had been so mistreated to this point.

"It's okay; he doesn't like to be touched all the time." Steve mutters, touching his pink cheek with hesitant fingers before sighing quietly. "I scared him, it was my bad." He stands up, leaning over to press a soft kiss to Jonathan's head gently before heading back into the bathroom. It's a risky move in Joyce's opinion but Jonathan doesn't even really flinch under the contact. He looks after Steve with sadness in his eyes, like he was guilty over having harmed him. Joyce saw then that her son was still in there, fractured and broken, but still breathing and alive. Not just a shell.

Steve comes back with his face damp with water and his cheek still slightly pink, Jonathan hesitantly reaches out for his hand this time and the older boy allows him to grasp it gently. There's a knock on the door, Joyce turns her head to find Jim standing with who she assumes is a doctor.

“Joyce, Dr. Reilly would like to speak with you.” Jim informs her, she nods and stands up.

-

Will takes a long time observing his brother, from his wild and tangled hair to the scars on his arm, everything that was so awful but so real and alive. He had nightmares for weeks after it all, even worse than after the Upside Down. The young man who had practically been the most important person in his life had been yanked out from under his feet. He had saved Will, risked his life, and been shot in the chest. Will would never forget the look in his eyes; he was seconds from jumping onto the hood. That pure and unwavering fear he felt and saw on his brother as blood started to stain on his shirt.

It had taken him a long time to start moving on, and he really believed that he would never fully recover from it. He would be making a sandwich home alone and his mouth would open, ready to ask Jonathan if he wanted one, when he’d remember. He spent days alone in Jonathan’s room, sorting through his things and listening to his music. He even wore his clothes a lot; they were just beginning to fit him instead of hanging just above his knees and slipping on his shoulders.

A lot of times it had felt like he was simply away at college, but Will had attended the high school graduation. He had cheered and clapped for Steve and Nancy, but there had been a gap in the names that reverberated inside him like he was an empty shell.

It felt like it had been eons and yet mere days since he'd last seen Jonathan, he saw him in his dreams almost every night. Not all of them were nightmares, sometimes he was just there, a passing face or a helping hand. He missed falling asleep watching TV together, he missed having dinner with him, and he especially missed his presence in general. It felt like every time he turned around someone was supposed to be there, watching over him, but nobody was ever there.

"I missed you, so much." Will says quietly after a few minutes. Jonathan was messed up and freaking out, so confused and on edge that he had just slapped Steve across the face like he was about to attack him or something. All Will wanted to do was hug him, but he didn't want to hurt Jonathan or scared him even more. "I've been wearing your shirts," He admits with embarrassment, Jonathan stares at him with intense eyes and Will flinches a little when his hand reaches out.

Jonathan takes Will's hand and pulls him from his spot at the end of the bed and forcing him to stand and walk along the edge until he's at Jonathan's side. Jonathan looks up at him, eyes calculating as he takes in Will's appearance. It looked like the old Jonathan, like he had gotten lucid and more aware.

"You got big," Jonathan whispers softly before pulling him down into a gentle hug, Will's eyes burn with tears as he hugs his brother firmly. Will can feel his chilled skin and his bones are more prominent than ever, but it's his brother and he knows it.

"Maybe you got smaller," He offers jokingly as he leans away, sitting down on the bed a little closer to the older boy. They fall into a lapse of silence, and Will's throat aches with emotion as he sorts through his many thoughts. Jonathan's eyes are back on Steve,

and then they're just staring at one another like if they looked away one of them might vanish. Steve had spent so long denying Jonathan's death, searching for ways to find him again. Sometimes Will thought that Steve was losing his mind, and maybe he was in a way, but with this he could move on.

"I used to have these visions, before we found El…" The youngest Byers finally says, pulling Jonathan's eyes back to him in the process. "I'd see the Upside Down all around me like I was still there… And there were these slug things," He watches Jonathan stare at him with that vacant expression, Steve's eyes widening in his peripheral. He clears his throat to gather confidence before he continues. "I'd throw them up, it was scary, but I didn't want to bother you or mom. It stopped a little after you disappeared; the only person that knows is El. I told her after you…" He lets his voice trail off, rubbing at his arms and staring down at the floor.

"Why tell us now?" Steve questions softly, and Will has the urge to get defensive. He knows Steve is just curious, not accusing or placing blame. He looks up at the older boy, who had sort of become a brother to Will in an odd way. They spent time together casually but only on occasion, most of the time Steve locked himself in his house and only came out for essentials.

"Because I don't want to have any regrets," He mutters before shrugging uncomfortably. "I never want to keep secrets from you guys, and this is like a second chance." He admits quietly, glancing towards the door and thinking of his mother who was just outside. He wouldn't tell her, she didn't need that on her head, and he knew that Steve and Jonathan would be able to sympathize with him in a way over this.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Joyce steps back in the

room. She looks pale and tears are glistening in the corners of her eyes, but she smiles weakly at them as she returns to sit down in her chair. Will watches her shift a little uncomfortably, her hands seemingly restless as if she wants to reach out to her son. Jonathan's staring down at his lap in silence, maybe he was thinking about what Will had said or maybe he hadn't heard at all.

There was something about Jonathan that seemed so severely different, not his appearance but his demeanor. The positioning of his shoulders, the way his entire body was so very still, especially his eyes. They were so empty and cold; nothing like Will had grown up with.

"Jonathan, sweetie?" Joyce says quietly, Jonathan's jaw twitches a little but he doesn't look up this time. "Your doctor says that they want to keep you under observation for a little while, but there's nothing seriously wrong." There's a silent *physically,* at the end of Joyce's sentence that Will can hear as she tells him, glancing away from Jonathan's unresponsive form to offer a shaky smile to her youngest.

"We kept your room the same, I cleaned up a little but it's mostly the same." Will promises to his brother eagerly, Jonathan reaches up and scratches at his face almost mechanically. It was like that earlier lucidity had faded away and left this hollow shell once more, Will bites the inside of his cheek. He glances over at Steve when the older boy reaches out, his fingers brushing against Jonathan's scratching hand.

"Stop, Jonny." He mutters, Jonathan's eyebrows scrunch together in seeming frustration but he drops his hand nonetheless. "Don't let him do that, he scratches until he breaks skin." He says to Will and Joyce, Will feels a sick feeling beginning to bubble in his

stomach. His eyes fall to Jonathan's arms, where there are scratches and scars and scabs that look irritated and piled over one another like a blind man making tic-tac-toe boards on skin.

"Did you tell the doctor?" Joyce asks, leaning forward and hesitantly reaching out. Her fingers brush against Jonathan's scarred arm, his hand twitches in response but he doesn't jerk away.

"It's not an allergic reaction to his meds, and the doc thought that it might just be just healing skin but he scratches his face too and there's really no scars there." Steve explains quietly, reaching up and adjusting a strand of Jonathan's hair that was sticking out funny. They're all awkwardly quiet for a moment and then Joyce sits up a little straighter and glances between Steve and Will before sighing.

"The doctor said that Jonathan's consistent confusion and behavior is most likely trauma," She looks like it pains her to say, and her eyes keep bouncing from Jonathan and back down to the scratchy sheets on the bed like she can barely maintain composure. It was hard to talk about Jonathan like he wasn't there, but he honestly gave them not much of a choice from his distant demeanor. "He said if it continues he would recommend placing Jonathan in a full time care facility, because he would need to be watched around the clock." Her voice breaks a little in certain places, and Will feels his chest tighten with emotion.

"No way!" His voice squeaks, he shakes his head as tears build in his eyes. "We can't just abandon him, mom!" He exclaims, a stray tear streaks down Joyce's cheek and she quickly wipes at it before reaching out towards her youngest boy. "We went through all of this just to stick him in some nut house?!" He demands, anger beginning to pulse through him. Jonathan wouldn't stand for this if it

was Will in his place, he'd do whatever he could.

"I'm not saying it's a definite, I'm just saying that if he needs someone to watch him then I can't be around all the time." Joyce says with a calming gesture, "We have to think of the possibilities, he's right here and it's like he's in another world, honey. I want him back as much as you do, and I would never quit on him but this might be too much even for us." Will shakes his head and stands up.

"Then I'll stay with him, and I'll get a job! We can switch off watching him and working!" He pleads, Joyce shakes her head.

"Sweetheart, you know that's too much responsibility for you to take." She whispers, her voice strained and a little hoarse, Will blinks a few times but doesn't care that tears are dripping down his face.

"Jonathan got a job when he was fifteen! He's been taking care of me since I was born! He's given up everything for me, for us! I'm not gonna stand by and watch him get shipped off because some shitty doctor says he's too much to handle!" He rants with a wave of his arms, the movement makes Jonathan jerk and Will finds his energy depleting at the sight of Jonathan covering his ears and scrunching his eyes closed as if the noise and conflict around him was too much to handle.

Steve has a hand on Jonathan's back, he had kept quiet so far but he looked like he was thinking pretty hard as he soothed the young man in the bed. Joyce doesn't respond to Will, simply turns her eyes to her eldest as the youngest sinks down onto the bed again.

“I can take him, Ms. B.” Steve says quietly after a moment, holding up a hand when Joyce begins to protest. “I’m sitting around for hours at my house doing nothing for days on end; it’s about time I do something with my life.” He says seriously, Will smiles at him with relief, feeling ten times better just knowing that Steve was on his side in this. He’d never let Jonathan be sent away, it made Will feel sick to think that Jonathan might have to live in some facility miles away from his home.

“We couldn’t ask you to give up such a big part of your life.” She says hesitantly. “I mean, what about college? You could get out of here and move on, Steve, just like Nancy’s doing.” She urges, but Steve simply shakes his head.

“No offense, Ms. B but there are worst things than living a simple life.” Steve mutters, taking a moment to coax Jonathan into lowering his hands back down into his lap. The young man complies begrudgingly and shoots a wary look over at Will that feels like a dagger in the young boy’s heart. “I’m not a college man; my dad spent the last few years of his life hounding me about not having enough ambition and planning a future.” He takes one of Jonathan’s hands between his own and sighs. “If Jonathan improves then maybe I’ll look into something to bide my time, if he doesn’t then I have no problem spending the rest of my life looking after him. Money is no issue, I promise."

“You realize how ridiculous that sounds right?” There are tears in Joyce’s eyes once more and her voice shakes awfully, but Steve simply shrugs.

“Ms. B, Jonathan’s been my responsibility since the day I

walked into your house swinging a bat at that damn monster to save his life. I fell down on the job and I want to make it up to him. If anybody can help him, it's me and you guys." Steve swears honestly, Will scrambles around the bed and throws himself at Steve. He hugs the older boy tightly with a sob and Steve hugs him back just as firmly.

"Thank you, Steve." He sniffs.

"Besides, I bet Jonny will be as good as new in no time." Steve offers optimistically as they separate, they all turn their eyes back to the young man in the bed. He seems to be paying them no mind, and if he is he shows no signs of it. His head is tilted slightly and he's staring at the foot of the bed with that same vacant expression, it's eerie and all too sobering. It brings back the reality of the situation, there was nothing to celebrate. Jonathan was broken, possibly without the ability to come back together. What would Will do if he had to see his brother like this for the rest of their lives? The idea of it made him ill, he couldn't decide if he wanted this or not. Would it have been better to just keep visiting the grave and let the wound heal over with time? It was a grim thought, but one that Will couldn't actually make a decision over.

That didn't matter though, Jonathan was here and alive and Will was going to do everything to help him get better. They'd try and try and never stop, even if Jonathan never got better, he'd never stop trying because he knew Jonathan would never stop trying. Jonathan was persistent and Will would be too, that was that.

-

"We're willing to offer reparations for the damages," The

woman tells Jim from the seat across him in the car, as if she were talking about a car wreck or some sort of machine malfunction. The dark tinted windows and the muscle that often accompanied her unnerved him, but right now he was too pissed to be afraid.

"This isn't damaged property; this is a human fucking being." He hisses, hands clenched in his slacks and knuckles white. He had set up this meeting just after Joyce had talked to the doctor with him. The man's face had been rather sad and he'd explained that Jonathan's behavior was like that of more severe kidnapping and torture victims.

He had evidence of a lot of unidentifiable drugs in his system; there were healed fractures and breaks in his fingers, arms, and legs. They were already noticing an odd sensitivity to light; they were going to do some eye exam soon to see what the damage was. He was rather weak and suffering from different vitamin deficiencies, and it didn't seem that much of this could be solved with just a few weeks in the hospital. His immune system would most likely be wrecked for the rest of his life from the consistent drug use and no doubt he'd have more mental scars than anything else.

Jonathan Byers was a hollow shell of the brave and kind young man he'd been when he was taken away from here, and someone had to pay for that.

"This is all a misunderstanding, it's not my fault that this happened." The green-eyed woman says with a shrug of her shoulder as she clicks her pen and sets it on her clipboard beside her.

"Not your fault that a seventeen year old boy was shot and kidnapped and then routinely abused by *your* men?" He demands, the

woman sighs quietly and then reaches for the file underneath the clipboard. She begins to look through a few papers held inside the beige folder, her expression neutral and unconcerned for Jim's seething rage.

"Jonathan made an agreement with us, he promised to steer clear of our investigation. He broke that promise, so we took what we needed. However, he proceeded to continue to interfere." She says with a shake of her head and a click of her tongue.

"You kidnapped two children, one of them his younger brother, did you expect any of us to just let you do something like that?" He points a finger at her, she arches an eyebrow at him.

"After he was shot, our doctors saved that young man's life. We brought him back from the brink of the dead, half of his blood drained out of him and two flatlines." She holds up two perfectly manicured fingers for emphasis as she speaks.

"You brought him back so you could experiment on him like some guinea pig." He says through clenched teeth, shifting in his seat restlessly. "And if you think that I'm going to let this go you have another thing coming!" He threatens, the woman smiles then, it's the first real expression he's seen on her face. It's malicious and wicked, something out of an old Bond movie.

"James, we didn't hold him against his will." She holds out a paper, which he quickly snatches out of her hand and then glares down at the small print.

-hereby agree to any and all testing and trials to be done within a period of time to be agreed upon…

-relinquish all control to the doctors and staff of the testing teams…

-hold no liability for any adverse side effects or outcomes…

Jonathan Byers

Jim grits his teeth at the sight of the messy signature at the bottom, he tears the paper up and crumples it in unforgiving fists, but the woman across from him seems nonplussed.

“You forced him,” He snaps, she shakes her head.

“He made an agreement, he spends time in our facility and we hold our end of the deal. In fact, he didn’t last through his entire stay, but we’re still going to be polite and keep up our promise as long as you accept the reparations without a fuss.” She swears to him, he scowls and glares at the woman.

“What’s your end of the deal?” He demands.

“Those are things that are strictly between us and that decent young man. I do hope he recovers; he was rather sweet, wasn’t he? It’s a pity, the poor thing’s mind started to go near the end.” She sighs almost sadly, Jim jerks forward to make a grab at her and the man sitting beside him grabs his arm and the car pulls to a halt.

“I’m going to get you for this!” He snarls as he’s hauled out of the car, thrown onto the pavement without precaution. The window rolls down and the woman leans her head out.

“I wouldn’t try, my friend. The careful balance of your life and everyone’s around you hangs in the balance, one wrong move could be disastrous.” She promises with a glint of her eyes, as the window starts to roll up she continues. “I’ll be seeing you, James Hopper.” He watches the car drive off unhurriedly down the street; he pulls himself to his feet and has the urge to punch something. He storms back down the road towards his cruiser, yanking the door open and getting in before slamming it behind him.

Jim bangs his hands against the steering wheel with a shout of frustrated anger. The fight leaves him just like that, and he leans forward to rest his head on the wheel with a tired sigh. How was he supposed to be a pissed off rogue cop hell-bent on revenge when the enemy had leverage over the people he cared about?

-

Everything was bright and strange and overwhelming to the point of dysfunction. There were patches in his memory, everything was foggy and confusing and there were moments where everything seemed like a dream or like he hadn’t escaped at all. He still couldn’t tell if this was a dream, part of him had started to think he might be dead but the lingering ache and exhaustion that had been following him for so long still held strong despite the people in his presence.

His thoughts were a jumble of many things and nothing at all, his mind battling through waves of uncertainty and confusion, not to mention the paranoia. He had been in a similar situation not long

ago, and it had all been a trick, another experiment. Part of him wanted to wake up just to stop the torture; the rest of him wished this was real more than anything else. Faces were vague and blurry but all too familiar, and every time he took pleasure in the sight of them he felt like his heart was being wrung out. The voices around him comfort him but he can't remember who they're supposed to be.

His hearing faded in and out, catching the occasional few words from the people surrounding him. It was so hard to focus on anything anymore, it felt like his brain was broken and he was slowly dying. He'd stopped being coherent quite a while back, how long he wasn't sure, he often lost track of time in his room, then lost time all together. The experiments seemed never ending, from injections and medication to seemingly endless darkness, blinding lights, and voices. It felt like they just wanted to push his mind to the limits. But at the same time he had broken a long time ago, his mind was no longer one whole train of thought with functioning processes. His thoughts are in fragments of passing ideas that come and go, sometimes reality is hard to grasp, sometimes everything is so vivid and real that his head hurts and he feels like his brain is cooking in his skull and ready to spill from his ears.

A hand touches his arm and he keeps himself from pulling away this time. In the past few hours or days maybe because he really wasn't sure, the hands that were on him didn't try to hurt him or do anything he didn't really like. There had been some loud noises, and a few times he'd made a mistake and hit someone or panicked because he'd gotten confused. He never felt bad about hitting anyone before, so he probably shouldn't do it again. But everything right now was quiet and dark and calm, and focusing on his hands or a single spot somewhere in his vision, he could gain this lucidity he hadn't maintained in a long time. It felt like his head was clearing up, the cotton in his ears beginning to fade.

"C'mon, Jonny, look at me." He knows that voice; the words jar him

in the slightest and still make him feel like he's falling. He turns his head in the slightest, trying to maintain his focus that he had worked so hard to achieve. His mind lags behind in recognition, like he was seeing a familiar face but couldn't place where he'd seen it before. But he knows this person, he knows he does. It takes him a moment, but then he remembers.

Hey, what do you say after we find El, we take a nap as our first date?

Steve's face is just as beautiful as the day Jonathan last saw it, but he had a lot of dreams and hallucinations so there was no guarantee the last time he remembers seeing him was actually him. But that doesn't matter because he's here right in the moment, real or not, he's gorgeous and real looking and that's all that Jonathan knows right now.

"Steve," His voice sounds like he's been gargling sandpaper, but the sight of Steve's eyes sparkling with joy is worth listening to the grating noise.

"Hey, you know me!" He whispers with excitement, but he doesn't really understand what he means by that. Jonathan reaches out cautiously and his hand is a little clumsy as it touches Steve's cheek. He almost pokes Steve in the eye but the older boy doesn't seem to mind, his skin is warm and his hand presses over Jonathan's and it's so real. Some hallucinations are more real than others, but this seems almost different. Maybe his hope was returning with the idea of seeing Steve again, or maybe this was actually happening.

"S'this real?" Jonathan mutters, Steve's eyes soften with a deep sadness and he nods his head.

“Yeah it’s real, buddy.” He says something else but it doesn’t quite reach Jonathan, it registers as words but they aren’t processed properly for him to understand them. He suddenly can remember his mom, his brother, where were they? Had he seen them too? Were they real or just a figment of his sick mind? “You want some water?” Steve moves and Jonathan keeps his eyes on his face just so he doesn’t feel nauseous from the movement. Everything moved so fast sometimes, he felt like he was watching a VCR on fast forward.

Jonathan nods his head and when Steve holds up the cup, he rests a shaking hand on his wrist to take a sip. His throat feels raw, like he’d been screaming, he thinks he might have been earlier. The water is cool and it makes him realize how dry his mouth and throat are and how thirsty he is. Steve lets him drink his fill and then pulls the cup away, wiping at the corner of Jonathan’s mouth.

“Do you know where you are?” Steve questions gently, thinking about it makes his head hurt, he can feel scratchy sheets clenched in his hands and he’s in some sort of bed. He shakes his head slowly; there was no answer that came to him. “You’re in a hospital, back in Hawkins.” Steve informs him; Jonathan turns his eyes away and focuses on his trembling hands. The scars on them remind him of awful things so he closes his eyes. Hawkins, how had he gotten back home? There was a vague memory of stumbling down a road, something about a newspaper and lots of blood.

He takes in a deep breath, reaching up to rub at his tired eyes and sighing softly. He never thought he’d make it home, and to be honest he still really didn’t believe he had pulled it off. There was a stubborn disbelief pitted deep in his chest, he needed proof. Jonathan needed clarity, he wanted to be able to see straight for longer than a few minutes, and he wanted to be able to keep a train of thought without completely forgetting everything about what was going on around

him. He wanted his mind back, which was a rare thought, a sober and clear thought if anything.

Steve was saying something else, but Jonathan was so stuck in his own thoughts it sounded like inane gibberish and muffled language. He pulls himself back a little and turns his eyes back to the older boy, he has a flash of an image in his head.

Hold this for me,

Jonathan blinks; everything was so messed up, even his memories. There had been a time where the images of his friends and family in his head had kept him going, but after a while he had forgotten what they looked like. He forgot their names sometimes, forgot he even had a brother, or a mother… He forgot that Steve had been his boyfriend, which was real right? Steve was real, or was he?

He feels like his mind is starting to separate at the seams, confusion and anxiety ripping his clarity to shreds. A sob tears from his throat and he covers his face with a shaking hand, there's a hand on his arm and he can't quite remember whose it is. All he knows is that he's upset, so he lets himself cry until he can't anymore.

After he finishes crying, whether it is for an hour or mere minutes, he feels drained. His confusion takes the reigns once more as he observes white walls and feels scratchy sheets. The facility. No, wait a moment. The hand in his is comforting, fingers in his hair are much too kind to be the curt nurse that often threw him pity looks. He lays down because he can't hold himself up anymore, wiping at his eyes and trying to figure out where he is.

Not the facility, couldn't be, the lights were so much brighter. Unless it was a new experiment, like the one where they made it pitch black and all he knew were the voices in his head and the noise around him until he couldn't distinguish the difference between them anymore.

"I'm gonna be right here," The voice forces him to stop thinking; he turns tired eyes to the person dragging their fingers through his hair. Nice, this was so nice; he wanted this nurse from now on. It's a boy funnily enough, and after he blinks a few times he realizes he recognizes the face. It's like hitting a rewind button, press play.

You're in a hospital, back in Hawkins.

Right, in a hospital with Steve, that was where he was… There was someone else he wanted to see, but he wasn't sure who, right now Steve was good.

"Steve," He whispers, and the young man smiles at him so gently and kind. Steve had something for him; he was holding it for him. He glances down at the hand in his and frowns a little; the other hand is in his hair. What was it again?

Think. Think. What was it?

"I need it back," He mutters, Steve gives him a puzzled look.

"Need what back, Jonny?" He questions softly, and Jonathan remembers.

“My kiss.” He breathes, Steve’s eyebrows raise up high on his forehead, making crinkles in his skin that Jonathan wanted to kiss. Steve was his boyfriend, he remembered now! He missed him so much, how long had he been gone?

“How could I forget?” Steve’s eyes shine with tears, and Jonathan isn’t quite sure why but he presses into the lips against his. He can’t remember what it felt like before this, can’t remember a lot of things, but he wants to sear this into his mind so he never forgets ever again. He presses his hand to Steve’s neck and feels the warmth and realness, was this truly reality?

They pull back and Jonathan rests his head back down on the pillow, tired. Steve combs his hair back and then settles his hand on the younger’s forehead, a small smile on his face.

“Get some sleep, Jonny.” The words make him frown in confusion. He couldn’t sleep, he wasn’t supposed to. Maybe this was a different experiment… No, that’s not right, where was he again? Hospital! His mind strains to keep a tight grasp on the current moment, he could never remember anything anymore. Maybe if he keeps Steve with him, he’ll help him remember.

“Don’t wanna forget,” He says tiredly, a tear drips down Steve’s cheek and Jonathan wants to wipe it away because he should never be sad but he’s so exhausted. Steve wipes it himself and nods his head, green eyes staring intently at Jonathan; he never wanted him to go away ever again. Where had he been? He wasn’t sure, but they had been apart for too long. “Don’t let me,” He begs softly, and Steve nods once more.

“I won’t,” He swears, leaning forward to kiss Jonathan’s cheek. Real, this was real, wasn’t it? Please dear God let this be real; Jonathan can’t wake up without him. His eyes start to droop and he doesn’t want to forget, doesn’t want to live without… without… What was his name again?

Steve, you idiot!

That’s right, Steve…

“Rest,” Steve tells him softly, and he does.

-

It takes almost three weeks for Jonathan to gain his strength back, after about six days he’s walking to the bathroom on his own and gaining some of his color back. He isn’t very talkative, although Steve takes into account that he wasn’t much of a conversationalist in the first place. This wasn’t thoughtful silence though; it usually seemed like empty silence.

Steve was looking on the bright side like everyone else; Jonathan had actually shown some recognition from Steve on his third night. He’d had a real conversation with Steve, even asked for the kiss he had loaned his boyfriend almost two years before. Steve had cried that night, after Jonathan had succumbed to his exhaustion. He had sat next to the bed and cried quietly into his hands, overwhelmed with relief and anxiety and all sorts of emotions swirling inside him.

Since then, Jonathan hadn't shown much more than that. He still flinched away from most touches and often looked at everyone around him like they were five seconds away from betraying him. There were moments where he looked at Steve like he used to, or he'd stare at Will or his mother like he was seeing a ghost. He'd say things that showed his true inner existence. There was actual recognition in his eyes, confused and bewildered, but seeing.

His eyes were exhibiting signs of a rare disorder where his pupils are refusing to dilate properly, which was the doctor's main concern at the moment. They said it might be a result of a past head wound or a million other things. It was causing a lot of light sensitivity to the point where he had to be wearing sunglasses to simply open the blinds during the day or have the fluorescent lights on. Steve had given him his pair, which he seemed pretty content on wearing a lot of the time. It seemed to make him more present in the moment, his head moved to follow their voices more. Dr. Reilly guessed that the lights were overwhelming him and mixing it with the stress of his extreme trauma made it harder to focus.

According to tests, the odd medications in his system were completely flushed out now and his vitamin deficiencies were balancing out. He was eating a little more and looking less brittle by the day, he still had a long way to go but he had already come a long way. Will had recently brought him a picture of a knight fighting a dragon and he'd actually smiled.

There were still some gaps with communication and understanding, sometimes it seemed like Jonathan didn't understand English. He wouldn't answer questions, sometimes he wouldn't look when he was directly spoken to, and he had a habit of routinely staring into nothing. He was in his own world, essentially, it was like he wasn't even there sometimes.

Nonetheless, he had kept his violent behavior to a minimum over the past two weeks and in doing so made Dr. Reilly more comfortable with releasing him. He had some trouble sleeping (nightmares that made him shake and cry something awful) which made the bags under his eyes still stick out more than anything, but with the sunglasses on he looked just fine. Dr. Reilly had barely hesitated before prescribing some sedatives for when he was leaving, which was today.

Jonathan was currently sitting on the edge of the hospital bed while Steve tied his shoes for him. He had been helping him get clean and redressed for a while because Jonathan didn't seem to want to take initiative to do it himself, or perhaps he couldn't remember how to do these things. Steve had originally placed the shoes on the bed and Jonathan had genuinely stared at them like they were a foreign concept until Steve had taken them and put them on his feet.

"Sunglasses on, Jonny." Steve says with a point of his finger towards the drawer beside the bed. Jonathan leans over and grabs the pair of glasses off of it. He slips them on his face without prompting and when Steve starts to stand up, Jonathan reaches out and grabs his sleeve. The older boy glances to the closed door out of habit before leaning forward and pecking Jonathan on the lips in compliance.

Jonathan gets his own jacket on and adjusts his hair down onto his forehead (over the marks on his temple, which he still showed no hurry in explaining) before shuffling a little closer to Steve when someone knocks on the door.

"Come in!" Steve calls as he runs a hand through his own hair, when the door opens Will steps in and Joyce follows.

“Hey, Steve.” Will nods his head, glancing behind him at Jonathan and waving at his older brother. Jonathan’s hand comes up in a similar gesture, stilted and a little mechanic, but an attempt at least.

“Ready to go home, Jonathan?” Joyce asks with a bright smile, her eyes shining. After the second day of seeing Jonathan, she had started to vehemently deny Dr. Reilly’s idea of sending him off. Jonathan was still present, a little scrambled, but he wasn’t gone.

She had expressed some concern over a possible outburst at home, as Jonathan had taken to hitting and pushing people away (he even bent Steve’s finger back the week before and sprained it) when they startled him or did things he didn’t like. It wasn’t extreme violence because Steve was always there to calm him down and reassure him, but there was that uncertainty. However, Steve had quickly volunteered to stay with them until they figured things out. He was best with the nightmares, with knowing how to touch and when, it was just for the best.

“I got here this morning and he was brushing his teeth,” Steve brags proudly, which seems like a small thing but Jonathan starting to do things on his own without prompting was huge.

“That’s great, honey!” Joyce smiles, Jonathan’s head is turned slightly and he seems to be looking at the wall or maybe the plant on the table across the room. It was hard to tell where he was looking with the glasses on, but he was obviously not paying attention.

“I got Hopper to drive me here so I don’t have to leave my car here.” He explains, and Joyce nods her head. Will seems to be bursting at the seams with excitement, restless energy expressed through his shifting posture and fidgeting hands forced still in his pockets.

“Sounds good, I talked with the nurse at the desk and we signed him out.” Joyce informs him, she herself seems very excited. It felt like a new start, a second chance as Will had stated. “Do we have everything?” She glances around the room for any remaining items. Steve points to the small duffle bag Joyce had brought for Jonathan on the bed. He hadn’t really been bathing other than Steve washing him with a rag and cleaning his hair in the sink, he wondered how hard it would be to get him to take a shower.

Will grabs the duffle bag off of the bed and slings it over his head and onto his shoulder without prompting. They all turn to Jonathan, who hadn’t really moved since earlier but they were all kind of getting used to him acting like a bit of a statue.

“Jonny, hey,” He prods, resting a gentle hand on his shoulder when he doesn’t respond. Jonathan’s head turns finally, Steve can barely see his eyes through the glasses. “You ready to go home?” He questions, smiling when Jonathan nods his head in reply. “All right! Then let’s blow this popsicle stand.” He exclaims.

Will steps out of the room and Joyce moves to follow him, Steve takes his first step and then looks back at Jonathan, who has his hands up near his chest and is twitching slightly.

“Jonny,” He calls as he watches the young man scratches gently at a scar on his finger. Steve gets a little closer and places his hand over Jonathan’s to make him stop, the itching hadn’t stopped but it wasn’t as hard to deter him from doing it. “Let’s go, dude.” He urges, Jonathan nods his head as Joyce steps back into the room.

“Come on, sweetheart.” She holds her hand out and Jonathan steps forward and takes it gingerly, the woman leads him out of the room. Steve steps out behind them and doesn’t look back as he closes the door; they take the stairs because Jonathan was still avidly avoiding the elevator for some unknown reason.

Joyce keeps a firm hold of her eldest son’s hand, which might have seemed like a overkill to most people but Jonathan didn’t seem to mind. He was looking around warily as they reached the bottom floor; a few people stared at them as they passed. Steve saw one of the girls he graduated with gawk at them as they walked by, but he simply kept right beside Jonathan and stared straight ahead.

“Mr. Byers, I’m glad to see you looking better.” Dr. Reilly greets, shaking Joyce’s hand and then Steve’s. “I’m still looking into some things for your predicament,” He says with a point towards the sunglasses on the young man’s face. “For now I’d just recommend keeping those on,” He says simply, before continuing. “However, this isn’t it. I still want you back here for a check-up in a couple of weeks and you need to be resting for at least the next few weeks.” He says to Jonathan, but his voice begins to trail off near the end when he realizes Jonathan is looking the other way at a little boy in the waiting room playing with a toy truck.

“Anything we should do to help?” Joyce asks, and Dr. Reilly nods his head.

“I highly suggest you get an appointment with a psychologist, preferably one who’s familiar with trauma of this caliber.” He pitches his voice a little lower and steps closer to them. “It’s vital that you keep an eye on him and make sure he’s eating and drinking properly. I meant it when I said around the clock care, just because he’s improved a little doesn’t mean that he’s capable of functioning on his

own right now." He says quietly, eyeing Jonathan with a thoughtful expression.

"We're going to have help," Joyce promises him, and he nods his head and leans back.

"Those sleeping pills can form habits, I'd suggest trying to get him to sleep regularly and then if it doesn't work then you can try them. He'll sleep a good eight to ten hours on them, which is good because he needs a lot of rest." Dr. Reilly says to them, and then glances over at Steve. "You've remained vigilant as always, Mr. Harrington." He says with a small smile.

"I'm sticking with Jonathan, staying over to help." He offers vaguely, and the man nods.

"Good, it'll be good to have a man in the house just in case." Steve's anger flairs up just a little at the comment, it was as if Reilly was expecting this to go down in flames. He didn't like the idea of Jonathan going home with Joyce and Will; he had pushed quite a few times for them to look into getting him a spot at the mental hospital about an hour away. Luckily, Joyce had joined their side and stuck with her guns.

"Yeah, right." Steve offers tightly, turning and placing a hand on Jonathan's back. The young man startles a little and looks to Steve, visibly relaxing as he sets eyes on him. Steve felt relieved that he was seeing him as safe and familiar now. "Ready to go, Jonny?" He asks, the younger nods his head and they say goodbye to the doctor.

They head outside; Jonathan falters at the door and ducks his head a little, his hand reaching out blindly towards Steve.

"Can't see, buddy?" He murmurs, stepping a little closer so that Jonathan can loop his arm through Steve's. He leads him out into the parking lot, Jonathan keeps his eyes closed and his head down. The sun really irritated his eyes; Steve just hoped it wasn't permanent.

Steve gets Jonathan into the back seat and climbs in beside him, Jonathan has his glasses propped on top of his head and is rubbing at his eyes with his hands.

"You okay, Jonathan?" Will asks from the front seat, reaching out and brushing his fingers hesitantly on his brother's knee. Jonathan makes a frustrated noise and lowers his sunglasses again, from this angle Steve can see him blinking with wide eyes for a moment before they squint back up and he slumps back in his seat.

"Ready?" Joyce questions, Steve nods his head. "All right, let's go home." She starts up the car and begins to pull out of the parking space. Steve reaches over and takes Jonathan's hand in his own, squeezing it gently as they begin to drive out of the parking lot. Jonathan scoots a little closer to Steve and turns to rest his head on the older boy's shoulder. Steve smiles gently, and for a moment he meets Joyce's eyes in the rearview mirror.

For the first time in a long time he feels whole, things weren't perfect or just right but that didn't matter right now. All that mattered was that Steve was with people that cared for him, he was with his family and Jonathan was home and safe. What may lie ahead, he doesn't know, but he didn't care as long as he had his boyfriend by his side. Steve wraps his arm around Jonathan's shoulders and pulls him a

little closer, combing his fingers through his hair to soothe him. They'd be okay, even if Jonathan didn't get any better than this, he'd spend the rest of his life like this if he had to. Some people might think him crazy, to take care of some guy and give up any hope of having a normal life, but that wasn't true. Steve didn't feel pointless anymore, he had found his destiny.

This wasn't a lost cause at all, it was his future.

10. Epilogue

Notes for the Chapter:

> (This is it, my dear friends!! Lost Cause is officially over, but don't fret! I've already begun the sequel, and I promise that it'll delve into certain things that were left open in Chapter 9. It's all part of the plan!! I hope you enjoy the last installment, I felt it was necessary to have a little update on how the boys are doing.)

December 10th, 1986

"Okay, how about camera?" Steve inquires as he runs his fingers through Jonathan's shampoo-covered hair, the young man frowning as he scrubs at his arms with a soapy rag. Steve allows him a moment while spiking his hair up in a bubbly Mohawk. The younger sits in the bath water, only a light sheen of bubbles at the top as a cover, but Jonathan wasn't very bashful about it. He wasn't embarrassed around Steve for physical things anymore, considering he relied on him for almost everything.

"C-A-M…" Jonathan begins quietly, wringing out his rag. "E-R-A." He looks to Steve for confirmation, the older boy nods his head in approval and Jonathan's lips quirk in the slightest with pride.

This had become their routine over time; Steve tested Jonathan's memory late in the evening before bed. When he had started talking a little more, Steve had come up with the idea when he noticed that Jonathan's memory seemed to have gaps and empty spaces in it. They just did this in an attempt to strengthen his mind, and it seemed to be working a little bit.

Dr. Reilly had suggested that the drugs he'd been heavily dosed with or possibly the electric shock therapy might have had some part in this; brain damage was a fickle thing. They were all hesitant to say the words 'brain damage', but that was the term they hovered around silently. Jonathan's head was a jumble of memory lapses, emotional and psychological trauma, and lots of confusion. It was hard to determine when it might be psychological trauma or physical damage; it was all so mixed together.

"You could do this, couldn't you?" Steve questions in a light tone, like a passing thought as he scrubs Jonathan's head gently. The younger doesn't respond as usual, he was despondent for certain things, and Steve never could figure out if he was blatantly ignoring him or if some things just didn't register properly. He could answer whether he wanted soda or water but he couldn't tell you what his favorite color was or what shirt he wanted to wear, sometimes he'd answer a question and sometimes he wouldn't, there was no telling what was going on in his head.

It wasn't that Steve didn't want to keep doing it; he enjoyed this intimacy with Jonathan. It was more of the fact that he couldn't do it himself that bothered him; Steve wanted him to be able to function properly on his own. He wanted Jonathan to think for himself and make his own decisions, not have to be looked after like a child. Sure, he was improving, but it was a slow and grueling process. It was sad to think that Jonathan might not ever fully recover, but Steve was going to get him as far as he could.

There were certain things Jonathan could do, things he didn't seem to want to do, and things he couldn't do. Steve was still trying to figure out if Jonathan was just being frustratingly dependent on Steve for some things or if he really didn't remember how to do them anymore. He didn't think he was faking or anything,

but it almost felt like Jonathan was scared to do things he knew how to do on his own. He could feed himself just fine, hold things, his speech was a little stilted but understandable and Steve thanked God every day that he could use the bathroom on his own… But at the same time Jonathan couldn't tie his shoes and if left alone to bathe himself he'd just sit in the bath and stare at nothing without specific prompting. It was odd and a little frustrating but Steve was adjusting to this new version of Jonathan.

The younger had become a little more than clingy towards him; Steve had to be with him almost constantly. Bathing was difficult at first because Steve didn't want to ruin what was left of his privacy, but it soon became clear that Jonathan saw Steve less as an intruder and more as a protector. He held onto Steve when he was introduced to new situations and often looked to the older for reassurance. Originally they had attempted to get Jonathan to take a shower, but that had triggered a fit and they'd quickly changed over to baths. Steve hadn't gotten him to bathe by himself yet, but he had hope that he could pull it off.

"A list, this time." He explains, touching Jonathan's chin to queue him to tip his head back and Jonathan follows his request. He rinses out Jonathan's hair, running his fingers through the long locks to make sure all of the shampoo was washed away. He needed a haircut soon, which would be a trial. Jonathan didn't like scissors or sharp objects near him in the slightest. "Snake, lighthouse, bat and…" He pauses to hum and think it over. "Boat." He adds quietly, pouring water over Jonathan's upper body to get rid of any remaining soap.

"Boat… Lighthouse…" Jonathan lists slowly, dropping his rag in the water to clean it. "Frog?" He turns his head to Steve with a grimace, but the older boy isn't bothered in the slightest.

“Two out of four, good enough.” He leans over and kisses Jonathan’s damp hair, pushing himself off of his knees and onto his feet. He straightens out with a groan, wiping his hands on the towel on the rack and then reaching for the one he had placed on the sink. “We could do another?” He asks after Jonathan gets out and allows Steve to wrap him in the towel. Jonathan shakes his head and yawns; Steve is filled with a strong affection for him and can’t help but press a kiss to his forehead.

Steve had been the first one to suggest Jonathan stay with him, of course it had been a hesitant idea but Joyce had agreed pretty easily. There were some issues they were slowly running into that were causing problems with Will and Joyce, which of course Steve didn’t blame them for. Steve often went home in the early afternoon to deal with some business things, and it was hard to trust Will home alone with Jonathan. Jonathan still had violent outbursts when he became confused or upset and it was only a matter of time before someone got hurt. There was also a problem with sleepwalking, Jonathan had walked out into the woods a week after he’d come home and it’d taken hours to find him. He'd been sitting under a tree in his pajamas, curled into a ball and shaking from fear and cold.

Joyce really couldn’t handle a severely traumatized nineteen year old, it was obviously difficult for her and Will to deal with. They were willing to do it of course, but Steve knew that Jonathan’s nightmares were cutting into their sleep and they were always worrying about him to the point of compromising their social lives. Will had stopped going out with his friends and Joyce had stopped going out for dates with Hopper. Steve had decided to take it up with Jonathan, who understood to some degree and seemed rather upset at the idea of his family suffering for him.

Jonathan still didn’t talk all that much but he’d insisted to everyone that he would be better off at Steve’s house. It wasn’t a very

long conversation, it mostly consisted of Jonathan saying he wanted to live with Steve and that it would be 'nice' for all of them. It would all work out, especially with Joyce and Jim getting a little closer. Steve wouldn't be surprised if they moved in together soon, and no doubt Elle would take Jonathan's old room. It wasn't that they were trying to push Jonathan from their lives, because they still went over every few days by Joyce's request for dinner. They were glad to have him back, Will even came over on Fridays to spend the weekend at Steve's house with them sometimes.

"Go change and get in bed," Steve instructs. Jonathan makes a bit of a face but steps out of the bathroom. Getting dressed was still a little new, but Steve had laid out his pajamas and it was underwear and a shirt so it should be no problem. He still had issues buttoning shirts and pants, and getting jackets to zip was an ordeal. But they were working on it, a little bit at a time. Steve leans over to open the drain of the tub. He pulls his shirt over his head and pushes his jeans off, closing the door and starting up the shower.

It had been extremely hard to compromise on bathing at first, Jonathan hated the sound of the shower (he got scared, fell, and hit his head the first night home when Steve started it up) but he also didn't like to be alone. At the Byers' house, he'd sit in Will's room for a bit while Steve showered, but here there was nobody else. Steve had compromised and found that making him busy often occupied him. He was supposed to get into his night clothes and lay in bed listening to music until Steve's return. They were working on compromises, things were still pretty rocky but he felt like they were gaining momentum.

Steve can take his time with a shower now, and when he steps out of the bathroom and slips into the bedroom he doesn't even have to worry that Jonathan might not be in bed. He's got his headphones on over his damp hair and his eyes are closed, a sight that Steve will never get over. He notes that Jonathan had set out a

pair of boxers and a t-shirt for Steve on the edge of the bed, and he smiles as he gets dressed.

Steve climbs onto the bed; Jonathan's eyes flutter open tiredly as the older boy begins to take off his headphones for him. Jonathan turns over onto his side with a soft sigh; Steve leans over him to set his Walkman on the bedside table on his side of the bed. He turns back to his side and reaches for the lamp cord on his table, freezing when Jonathan grabs his arm.

"Light," The younger reminds quietly but insistently when Steve looks back at him, he sits up and gets out of bed without argument. It was hard to remember sometimes, but Jonathan always did. He leans over and flips the nightlight in the wall socket on, it blinks to life and glows a soft blue color. He returns to the bed, climbing back in and observing Jonathan for any more objections before shutting off the lamp.

Jonathan scoots a little closer and wraps his arm around Steve's, cuddling it to his chest like a child with their favorite toy and sighing in content. Steve smiles tiredly up at the ceiling and adjusts the covers over them with his free hand. Things weren't fixed and they would never be perfect or normal most likely, but he still had his favorite person in the world.

"I love you, Jonny." Steve wonders if he's still awake, but he doesn't care if he hears it or not, it's just fact. He said it a lot more now, just at random, sometimes Jonathan wasn't even awake to hear it. But Steve had the urge to say it almost constantly so he did.

"Good," Jonathan mumbles into his shoulder, Steve grins up at the roof. His speech was a little simpler right now, it reminded

him of Elle when she had first returned from the Upside Down. He used the words ‘good’ and ‘bad’ quite a bit, but there were times where he put sentences together rather well. Usually when it was quiet and it was just the two of them, Jonathan would say something thoughtful or intelligent that would remind Steve that he was still there.

Steve startles from his thoughts when Jonathan moves suddenly, making a confused noise as the younger leans over him. Steve blinks in surprise when Jonathan’s lips press against his, his hand against his neck and his thumb clumsily imitating Steve’s past movements as it rubs at the elder’s jaw affectionately. Jonathan pulls back after a moment, dropping back down closer to Steve this time and settling an arm over his waist.

“Night,” Jonathan sighs against his neck; Steve kisses his temple and wraps his arm around his back. He settles a hand over Jonathan’s arm and closes his eyes, feeling utterly content with his life. This was what made it worthwhile, he’d love every single bit of Jonathan until he died because of this.

“Night, Jonny.” He turns his nose against Jonathan’s still drying hair and closes his eyes.